NEW

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Piano for Beginners

- Master musical notation
- Record your compositions
- Play in different genre styles

Everything you need to know to start playing the piano

Learn chords & scales



Welcome to Piano for Beginners

Making the decision to learn a new instrument can be a whim or a long-standing ambition. Either way, picking up an instrument for the first time is a daunting feeling, as the scale of the task sinks in. This is particularly true if you have never learnt to play an instrument before, with all those technical terms, scales and notation marks to decipher before you have even played a single note. This new edition of Piano for Beginners is therefore an essential guide for piano and keyboard first-timers. Simplifying the process through step-by-step tutorials, this bookazine will help you lay solid foundations for years of enjoyment. From the correct way to sit at the piano to reading notation, we start with the basics before expanding your musical horizons with easy home recording and genre-specific tutorials. With a glossary of essential terminology, a list of chords and even access to free online resources such as audio files, Piano for Beginners really is your go-to guide as you get acclimatised to the musical landscape and hone your piano-playing skills.



Piano for Beginners

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Contents

Guiding you every step of the way and providing you with everything you need to start learning to read music and play the piano



Give it a try

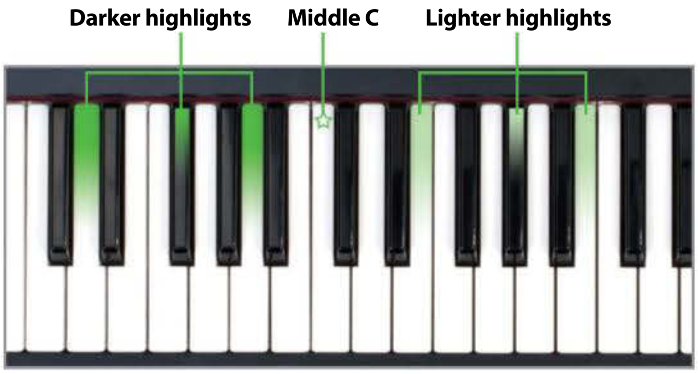
Look out for this logo on each page, as it means that an audio file is available online to help you master a certain tutorial.

Getting started

Understanding theory

Notes and keys

Throughout this book, you will see top-down images of a keyboard with the keys highlighted. The darker highlights show the keys played in the image, while the lighter highlights show the keys that need to be played in the step





Playing the piano



Location courtesy of Music Is Life, Bournemouth

The next step

Play in the style of

We outline the various musical genres and sounds that can be achieved on your piano

Reference

"Deciding to take the first step towards discovering your musical talents is worthwhile at any age"



"Learning to play an instrument is a rewarding journey and the piano is a great place to start"

Getting started

Our ultimate guide and step-by-step tutorials will teach you all the basics, from choosing the right piano and sitting correctly to playing your first melody



Give it a try

Look out for this logo on each page, as it means that an audio and/or video file is available online to help you master a certain technique.

The ultimate guide to the piano

Unleash your musical talents and learn how to play scales, songs and masterpieces on the piano

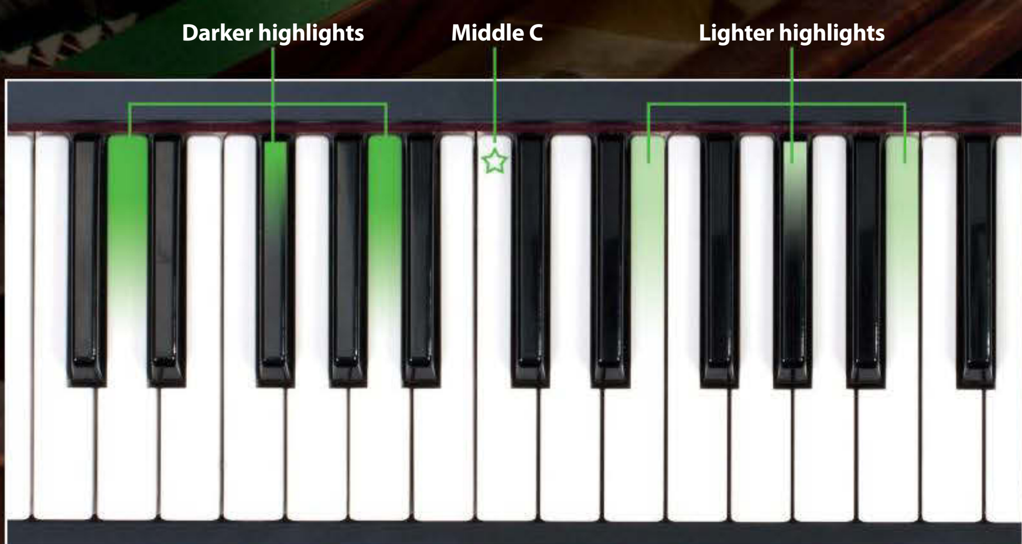
Deciding to take the first step towards discovering your musical talents is worthwhile at any age. Learning to play an instrument is a rewarding journey and the piano really is a great one to start with. Although you'll need plenty of time, practice and patience, the piano is a relatively easy instrument to master, which is why it's a popular one to try to learn first. Many musicians find that after conquering it, the idea of learning other instruments isn't as daunting.

The piano has come a long way since it was invented, and alongside the traditional acoustic varieties, there are now digital pianos and portable keyboards. Learning to play the piano is the same on all three, but you'll find some may offer more or fewer features than others, although this won't have a dramatic effect on how you play while you're still developing your skills. Regardless of which instrument you're using, you can still pick up the basics in this beginner's guide.

So whether you want to be able to play the odd tune, learn a particular song or compose your own musical masterpiece, you're in the right place. Join us and discover what the piano has to offer. In the following pages we'll introduce you to the different types of pianos that are out there and help you get started in front of the keys. You'll also discover how to read music and play with >>

Notes and keys

Throughout this book, you will see top-down images of a keyboard with the keys highlighted. The darker highlights show the keys played in the image, while the lighter highlights show the keys that need to be played in the step. The star shows where Middle C is.



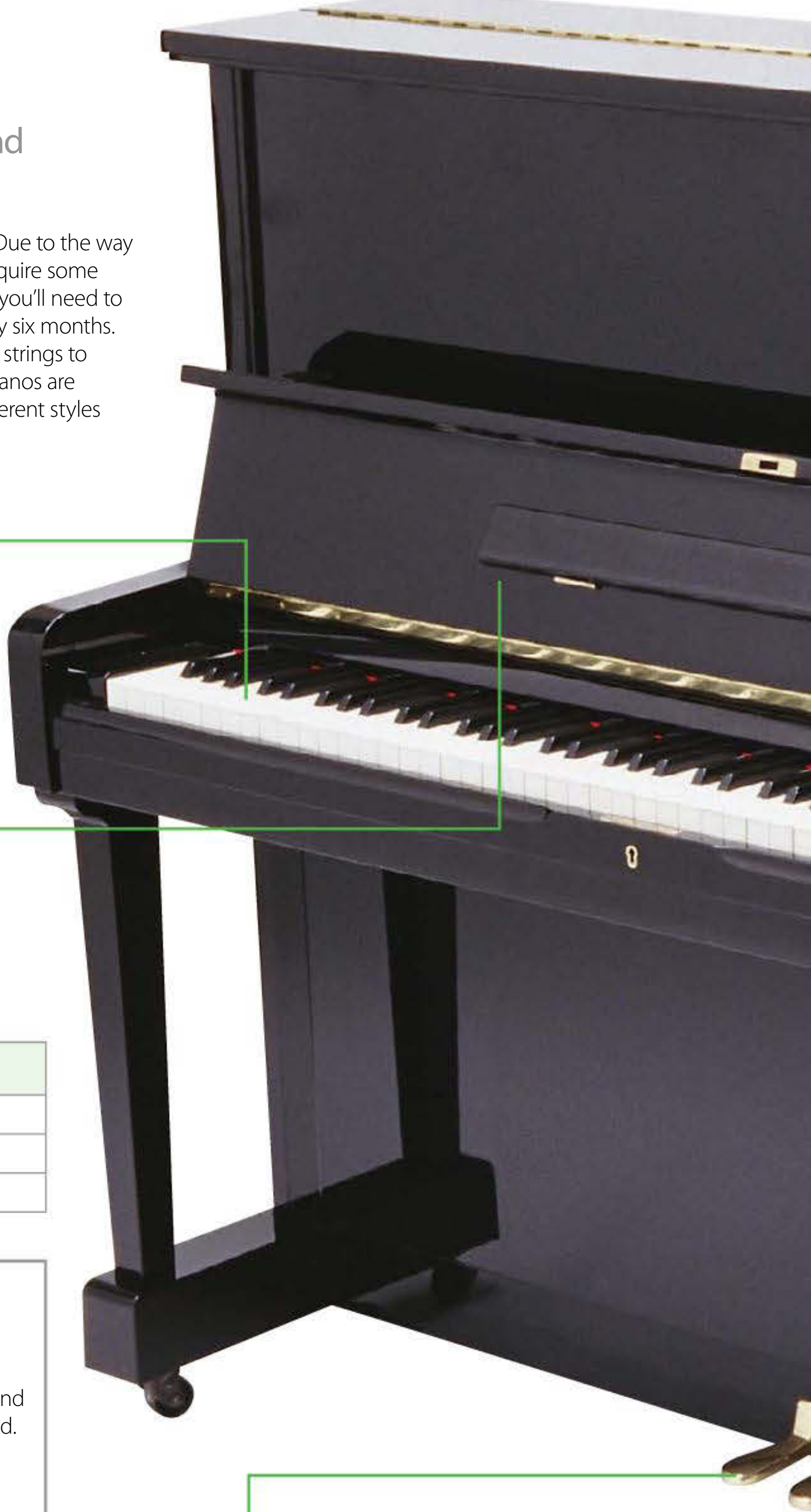


Acoustic pianos

Acoustic pianos produce a naturally rich sound and are favoured by more accomplished pianists

Acoustic pianos are considered a percussion instrument as felted hammers strike steel strings inside once you press down on a key to produce a note. The vibrations in the string then travel to a soundboard, which amplifies the music. Generally, the harder you press a key, the louder the sound.

Professional pianists generally favour acoustic pianos as they feature up to eight octaves and create a more natural, fuller sound. Due to the way they are built, acoustic pianos do require some level of maintenance, which means you'll need to have them tuned at least once every six months. This process involves tightening the strings to improve pitch. Although acoustic pianos are generally larger in size, there are different styles available, which vary in dimension.



Keyboard
The keyboard on your acoustic piano features a total of 88 keys, 52 of which are white and 36 black. Traditionally white keys were made of ivory and black keys wood. Once you press a key, a hammer inside will strike the string to produce sound

Piano lid
Nearly all acoustic pianos will have a lid of some description. Make sure this is closed when you're not playing as it'll prevent dust getting in

Pedals
You can use the pedals on your piano to adjust tone. The left pedal (una corda) will soften the sound, and right pedal (sustain) lifts all the felt dampers inside while you play, which are usually used to stop sound

Is acoustic right for you?

Pros	Cons
Richer and more natural sound quality	Requires more space
Up to eight octaves available	Needs regular tuning and maintenance
Beautifully designed	Is not portable

Different acoustic pianos

What style of acoustic piano suits your style and needs?

Acoustic pianos come in different shapes and sizes but largely fall under two main styles: upright and grand. Upright pianos are the smaller of the two as the interior strings are housed vertically, meaning it doesn't require a large back like a grand piano, where the strings lay vertically. Although you can get slightly smaller varieties of upright acoustic pianos, they don't differ too dramatically in size. Grand pianos on the other hand, although large, do come in varying sizes including small baby grand, slightly larger parlour grand and concert grand. The larger the back of the grand piano, the longer the strings, and so the richer the sound is that is produced.

Of the two acoustic varieties, grand pianos tend to be the more expensive. Their beautiful build and design also makes them popular as centrepieces in large rooms.

When compared to digital pianos, acoustic varieties seem to offer you a lot less for your money; however, the natural piano tones that are produced surpass those of an electronic model, which is why they are favoured by professional and traditional pianists.



Soundboard

The string vibrations produce some level of sound initially but it's the built-in soundboard that amplifies it so that it's then audible to the audience and pianist playing. The soundboard will vibrate at the same frequency as the strings to do this

Steel strings

The strings inside a piano are made from steel; they vibrate once they are hit by the felt hammers, which are controlled by the piano keys that you press to play. Once you release a key, a felt damper will drop onto the string to stop the sound

Insides

Acoustic upright and grand pianos have extremely complex insides – if something goes wrong with your piano, it's best to get a trained professional to look at it

©Thinkstock

>> others. There are plenty of beginner-friendly tips and advice along the way as well that'll help you improve and build upon your piano playing skills. So rest your hands on the keys and let's get started!

Buying your piano

Before you make your first piano purchase it's important you get a good understanding of what's on offer and which style of instrument best suits your skills and needs. Pianos vary dramatically in size, style and price. Most beginners opt for straightforward electronic keyboards, which are cheaper in price, portable and don't require as much space or maintenance. Electronic keyboards also include creative features such as sound effects and the ability to replicate other instrument tones.

A step up from the electronic keyboard is a digital piano, which offers similar features but comes with weighted keys, which you'll also find in the classic acoustic variety of piano. Like a keyboard you can create sound effects and most modern varieties of electronic piano even enable you to record the music you create.

When it comes to the acoustic variety of piano, there are two main types: an upright and grand. Acoustic pianos use strings to make sound and don't come with any electronic functions or features. They are also slightly larger in size and are generally more expensive.

You can keep costs down by buying a second-hand piano but always give it a thorough check through before parting with your money. Ensure acoustic pianos are tuned and electronic features on the digital variety are working well; you should also run through the keys to check sound. If you're thinking of buying online, visit your local music shop first to test out the different varieties of piano, which will help you make a better decision when it comes to committing to your purchase.

Getting started

Once you've set up your piano and you're ready to play, you'll need to ensure you're in the correct position before you begin. Place your sheet music on the music rack and sit with an upright posture on the stool, at the middle point of the keyboard, in front of the Middle C key. If you're sitting too low, you'll need to extend the height of your stool or place a cushion on top so that you're more comfortable and closer to the keyboard. Your feet should also be facing forward on the floor, more advanced piano players will use the pedals in this position to adjust tones and change sound quality while playing.

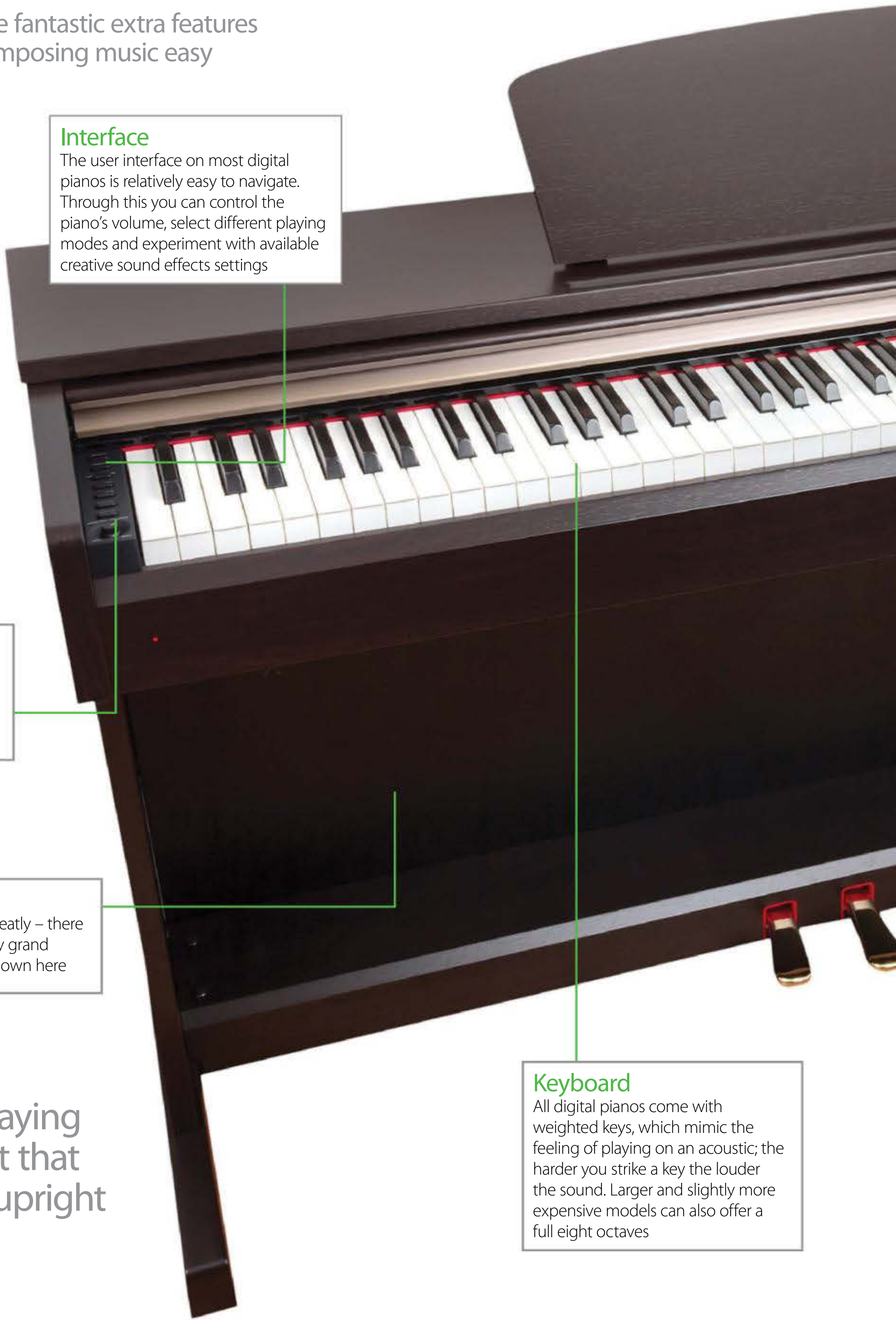
Always ensure your hands can rest comfortably on the keys, without having to stretch your arms too far forward. All ten fingers should be rested on the white keys with your right thumb positioned on Middle C. This means that your right hand should be positioned as follows; thumb – Middle C, index finger - D, middle finger - E, ring finger - F >>

Digital pianos

Digital pianos come with some fantastic extra features that make playing and composing music easy

Digital pianos share a lot of similar features to electronic keyboards. They are capable of creating sound effects and can also imitate other instruments. It's even possible to record the music you play on them. Unlike keyboards, however, digital pianos come with weighted keys, replicating the feel of playing an acoustic piano.

Larger digital pianos can also offer a full eight octaves like an acoustic and you may find that playing on one isn't that different to using an upright or grand piano. The harder you press the keys, for example, the louder the sound that's produced. However, the lack of strings in a digital piano means that the sound results won't be as natural or rich, as they use sound chips and speakers to replicate a traditional piano tone. One of the great things about digital pianos, however, is their low maintenance, as they don't require regular tuning and there are fewer things to go wrong with their insides.



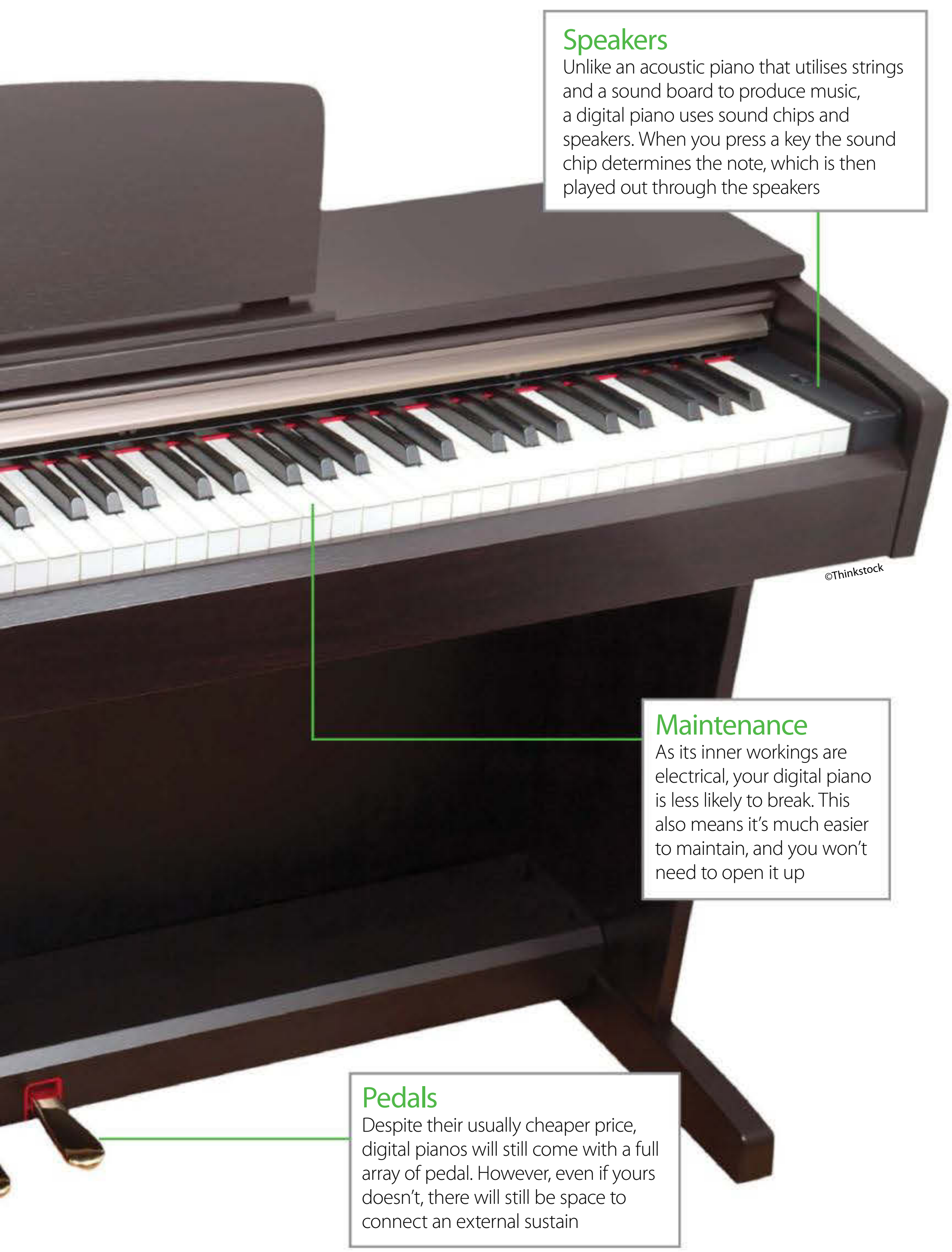
Interface
The user interface on most digital pianos is relatively easy to navigate. Through this you can control the piano's volume, select different playing modes and experiment with available creative sound effects settings

Input/Output
Many digital pianos include a headphone jack for private practising and some even enable you to connect a mic. It's also possible to directly record the music you play via USB

Build and size
The build and size of digital pianos can vary greatly – there are even some that are sized similarly to a baby grand piano. Most are shaped like the upright one shown here

Keyboard
All digital pianos come with weighted keys, which mimic the feeling of playing on an acoustic; the harder you strike a key the louder the sound. Larger and slightly more expensive models can also offer a full eight octaves

"You may find that playing on a digital piano isn't that different to using an upright or grand piano"



Is digital right for you?

Pros	Cons
Possible to record music you play	Sound quality is not as impressive as an acoustic
Low maintenance & doesn't need regular tuning	Requires space
Has weighted keys	Is not cheap

>> and little finger – G. Your left hand will need to be positioned an octave lower with your fingers positioned as follows: little finger – C, ring finger – D, middle finger – E, index finger – F and thumb on G. You'll notice that there are two white keys between your left and right thumb, which are A and B. Don't worry if you're struggling with the key names – we have in-depth tutorials on them later in the book.

If you're a complete beginner, you can add removable stickers to the white keys. You'll find it will help you locate the notes much easier while practising as most beginner-level sheet music uses these keys specifically. Simply use them as a guide while learning, then once you've got to grips with reading music and the correct hand positions you can remove them.

Different ways to play

The piano is a versatile instrument. With an extensive number of keys, 88 to be exact, there are endless sound possibilities. Using the right technique, and with plenty of practice, it's possible to play any genre or style of music.

Traditionally used for classical music, the piano can produce soft, soothing tones but is also capable of much louder and harder notes that are great for adding drama to a rock song or movie score. The piano is also widely associated with jazz genre where it's often played as a solo instrument alongside the singer.

At beginner level you're likely to focus on playing scales and simple melodies but once you're more confident in front of the keys, you can explore the music genres and begin learning songs that suit your musical style and taste. Fortunately there are some fantastic beginner-level music books out there that feature classic and more current sheet music. A lot have been simplified too, so you can learn the basic melody of a song without having to move too far up and down the keys. It's a great idea to listen to the music that you're learning to play too, as you'll get a much better idea about how the song should flow and the timings you need.

Reading music

You can play 12 notes on the piano overall, seven of which belong to the white keys – C, D, E, F, G, A, B, and five to the black – C sharp/D flat, D sharp/E flat, F sharp/G flat, G sharp/A flat and A sharp/B flat. These notes repeat up and down the keyboard. If you have a full-size keyboard the first note on the left-hand side will be A. On the right-hand side of the keyboard the notes will sound higher in tone and on the left they'll sound lower. Familiarise yourself with the keys and learn which notes they represent by playing simple scales. Practise scales regularly and eventually they will become a easy warm-up exercise before you play.

Being able to read sheet music and really understand it is an important part of learning to play the piano, or any instrument for that matter. This >>

>> does require patience but by taking a practical approach to learning, you'll be able to pick it up in no time.

You'll notice that notes on sheet music appear along five horizontal lines, which have four spaces in between. This is called a stave or staff. On sheet music where two hands are required to play, two staves will be present. The top stave features a treble clef, which looks like a very ornate G. This represents the high keys, to be played with your right hand. The bottom stave features a bass clef, which appears almost like a backwards C; this represents the low keys that are played with your left hand. Every space and line on the stave represents a note on the keyboard.

Get to grips with reading the top stave first as you'll find most beginner-level sheet music primarily uses your right hand. Notes appear along the top stave in succession with Middle C and D positioned below the bottom line. The notes that sit on top of the five lines are as follows, E, G, B, D, F, which can be remembered as Every Good Boy Deserves Food. The notes in between the lines spell out 'face': F, A, C, E. The bottom stave, however, is different, with the notes on top of the lines, G, B, D, F, A – Good Boys Deserve Food Always and those in between, A, C, E, G can be remembered as All Cows Eat Grass.

Run through them regularly and over time they will become second nature. You'll soon find that you no longer need sheet music that has the letter markings on the notes.

Practice and playing

Practice is key to mastering any musical instrument and so it's important to dedicate a set amount of time a week to doing so. Be firm with yourself and don't get disheartened if progress is a little slow at first. Taking at least a couple of hours out a week to practise your scales and a particular song will help you improve dramatically. Consider playing the piano with others too; it will give you more of an incentive to get better.

Once you begin to feel more confident in your piano-playing abilities, look into joining a band or playing music with a small group of friends. Having others around who are musically minded will inspire and encourage you to focus on developing your own skills. Learning a song with a group of people means you'll also get more support, advice and help when it comes to reading the music, timings and getting a good rhythm.

As the piano has an abundance of keys it can also be played by two people simultaneously, known as a piano duet. To do this, one person will need to be positioned on the left-hand side of the keyboard to play the low notes; they are known as the Secondo (second). The other person should be positioned to the right-hand side of the keyboard to play the high notes, known as the Primo (first). Specially printed sheet music can be purchased so that both the Primo and Secondo can play together. It's a fantastic way to practise, have fun and develop your skills. >>

Keyboards

Electronic keyboards are affordable, portable and offer some great digital features that are beginner friendly

Most budding pianists will learn the basics of piano playing on a keyboard. They're not only the most affordable option if you're looking to buy new, but they're also much smaller than an acoustic or digital piano so don't require as much space. They're designed to be lightweight and portable, so you can also set them up easily if you're practising on the go or going round a friend's house.

You'll also find they offer some fantastic electronic features, including demo modes, sound effects and the ability to replicate other instruments. In addition to this, most keyboards come with a headphone jack, which is great if you want to practise in private. They differ to acoustic and digital pianos as they don't offer as many octaves or weighted keys and sound quality is not as impressive.

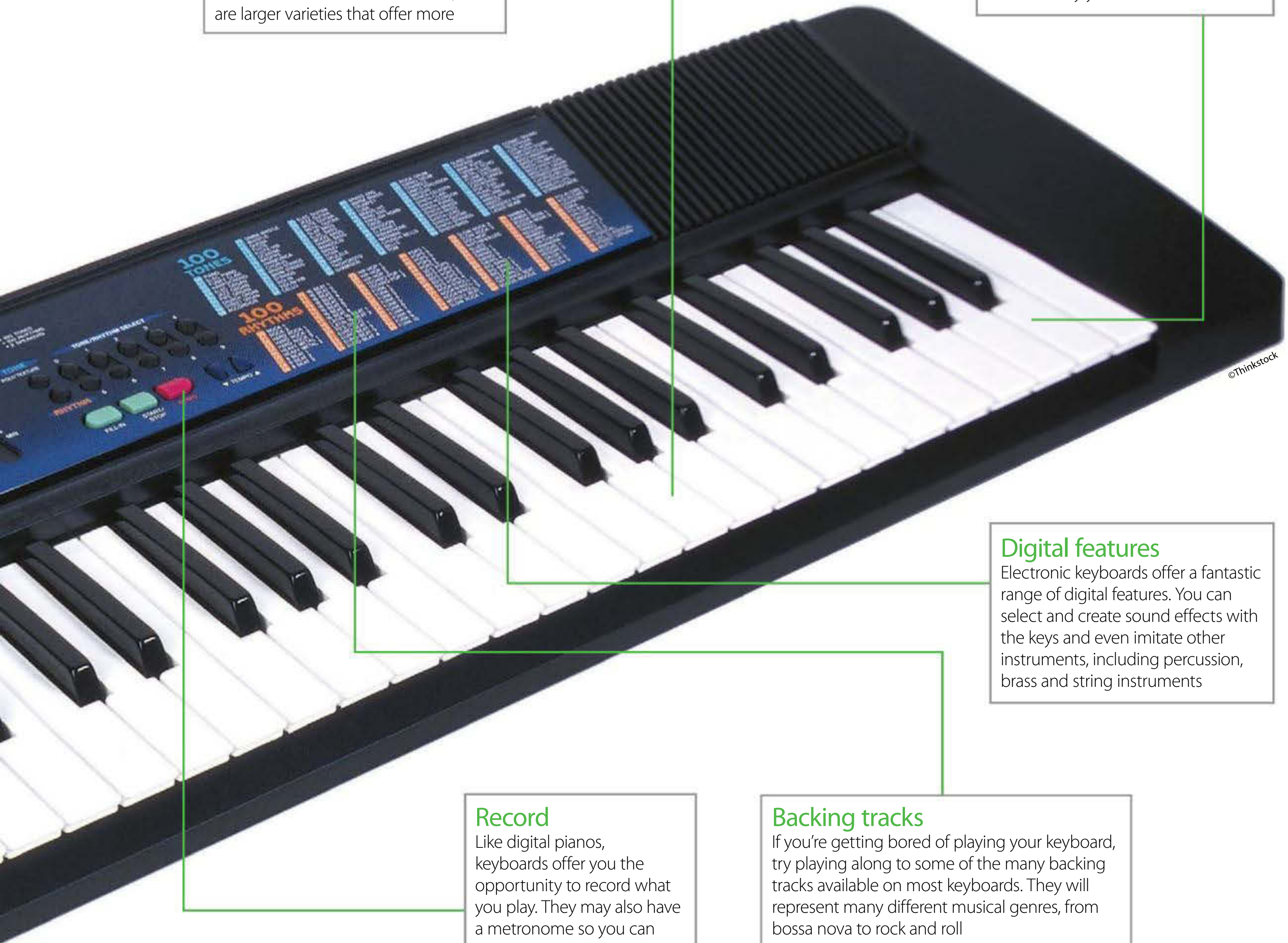


Volume control
Unlike an acoustic piano whereby the harder you press the key, the louder the sound, on a keyboard you need to adjust volume manually on the interface. You can, however, purchase specialist volume pedals that enable you to adjust volume with your feet while you play

Speakers
Like a digital piano, a keyboard has speakers; however, these aren't likely to be of the same quality. If you don't like the sound out of the speakers, you should be able to connect your headphones up to your keyboard

Keyboard
The keys on your keyboard are made from plastic and are not weighted so only a light touch is needed to create sound. Although smaller keyboards offer a limited number of octaves, there are larger varieties that offer more

Portability
Keyboards normally have fewer keys than a digital piano and are made of plastic, so they're lighter and therefore more portable. They're great if you need to carry your instrument around



Digital features
Electronic keyboards offer a fantastic range of digital features. You can select and create sound effects with the keys and even imitate other instruments, including percussion, brass and string instruments

Record
Like digital pianos, keyboards offer you the opportunity to record what you play. They may also have a metronome so you can stay in time while recording

Backing tracks
If you're getting bored of playing your keyboard, try playing along to some of the many backing tracks available on most keyboards. They will represent many different musical genres, from bossa nova to rock and roll

Pitch bend wheel
Many modern keyboards feature a pitch bend wheel, which is sometimes located to the left of the keys. It can be used to adjust the pitch of the note you're playing up or down. Practise using the wheel while you're playing the keys with your right hand

Is a keyboard right for you?

Pros	Cons
Lightweight and portable	Doesn't have weighted keys
Reasonably priced	Won't have as many octaves
Great electronic features	Requires extra accessories

Essential accessories

There's a fantastic range of accessories available for your acoustic piano, digital piano or keyboard that will help maintain its performance and improve playing. Here's a look at a few essentials

Like most instruments you can purchase a range of useful accessories for your piano. Some will help maintain your instrument's appearance and preserve the sound quality that's produced, while others will help improve playing when you're next practising or learning a new song. We've rounded up the top ten accessories out there for your acoustic piano, digital piano or keyboard. Take a look and see what you might need before you begin to play.



Piano stool

Recommended buy: Quiklok – Keyboard stool BX-8
Price: £26.99/approx $49.99 **URL:** www.quiklok.it

A good quality stool is essential if you're practising or playing over long periods of time. One that comes with extra padding and the option to adjust its height is a bonus. Some varieties even double up as storage so you can keep sheet music and your Piano for Beginners book in one place. They are also able in a range of finishes.



Keyboard stand

Recommended buy: Quiklok – Keyboard stand T/10
Price: £16.99/approx $39.99 **URL:** www.quiklok.it

Not all keyboards come with a stand. Some stands come at a fixed height while others are adjustable, which is fantastic if you're playing as part of a band and need to stand during a performance. They are also available in different colours, sizes and shapes depending on what suits your needs.



Headphones

Recommended buy:
Gear4music – Roland RH-5 closed stereo headphones
Price: £29/approx $45
URL: www.gear4music.com

Most digital pianos and keyboards come with a built-in headphone jack. Use it to practise playing in private. Good quality headphones are essential for sound quality. Padded varieties are also more comfortable if they're being used over long periods of time and will help muffle out background sounds around you.



Piano cover

Recommended buy: Gator Cases GKC-1648
Price: £19.99/$39.99 **URL:** gatorcases.com

Preventing dust from settling on your piano will help to maintain its performance and reduce the amount of cleaning needed. You can purchase covers in a range of different sizes, fabrics and shapes to suit the style and size of your instrument. Some keyboard covers even double up as a carry case so you can take it with you on the road.





"They'll help improve playing when you're next practising or learning a new song"

MIDI to USB adaptor

Recommended buy: USB MIDI Adaptor kit
Price: £20.99/approx $30 **URL:** www.thecablestore.net

If you want to connect your keyboard or digital piano up to your computer, then you will need to do so via USB. However, if you have an older keyboard, it may not have a USB connection. It should have two MIDI inputs, though. With two MIDI cables and this adaptor, you will be able to hook up your keyboard with ease.

Metronome

Recommended buy: Wittner Piccolo metronome
Price: £39.99/approx $55 **URL:** www.wittner-gmbh.de

Metronomes are used to help you keep tempo while playing. Many digital ones make a clicking or bleeping sound to do this and traditional varieties feature a swinging pendulum. You can also purchase them in various shapes, sizes and finishes so you can purchase one that matches the style of your instrument.





Portable MIDI controller

Recommended buy: KORG MicroKey 37
Price: £69/$99.99 **URL:** www.korg.co.uk

If you have a laptop and you like to make music on the go, then you may want to check out a MIDI controller. Chances are your main keyboard won't be too portable, so a small option like the KORG MicroKey is worth looking at. The keys are obviously a lot smaller, but you can hook it up to a laptop to keep the music flowing on the go.

Microphone

Recommended buy: Blue Microphones Snowball
Price: £49/$99 **URL:** bluemic.com/snowball/

Regardless of the model of your keyboard/piano, you can use a microphone to record your favourite tunes – originals or covers. Although prices for microphones can go well into the thousands, you can get a good desktop USB microphone for around £70. You can plug it into your computer and record directly onto there.





Piano polish

Recommended buy:
Gear4music – Piano polish 200ml
Price: £2.99 (RRP £4.99)
URL: www.gear4music.com

Keeping your piano clean is an important part of caring for your instrument. After you've dusted it and wiped it down with a damp cloth, use a specialist piano polish to maintain the piano's finish and appearance. Always remember to apply the polish to a clean soft cloth first and not directly into the piano itself.



Sustain pedal

Recommended buy: Gear4music – Casio SP-20 Sustain Pedal
Price: £26.99 (RRP £34.99) **URL:** www.gear4music.com

Some varieties of digital pianos and most keyboards don't come with pedals but you can purchase them separately. A sustain pedal has the same effect as the right pedal on an acoustic piano, which lifts the dampers off the strings as you play to sustain the notes. Although digital pianos and keyboards don't have strings, the sustain pedal can still have the same effect.

How to sit correctly at the piano

Perfect posture is an essential task to master on the road to becoming a good piano player

Before you start learning how to play the piano, the first thing you need to do is ensure you have the correct sitting position. Posture is very important for piano players, as it ensures you have the maximum level of flexibility to reach all the keys, and it also helps you learn the proper technique for striking the keys.

On the path to perfect posture, one of the major things you'll need is a proper seat. If you're slumped down below the piano you'll struggle to learn the basics, while if you're propped high in the air you won't be able to hit the keys properly. You don't need anything really expensive; the best thing to have is an adjustable seat, but you can also just use pillows and cushions to alter your height.

But don't be fooled into thinking that you'll have to keep a rigid position as you play the piano. The guide to perfect posture is to have a position that is not only comfortable and effective, but one that allows a degree of flexibility while playing. A good piano player doesn't just use their hands, they swivel their hips and move their body to make sure their playing style is at its optimum.

Here we'll talk you through the steps to achieving the perfect posture so that, when you eventually come to sit down in front of a piano, you'll be ready to learn the basics.

The path to perfect posture

Here we'll show you how to get the optimum position while sitting at the piano



01 The correct height

When sitting at the piano you want your elbow and arm to fall freely from your shoulder. Your forearm should be parallel to the floor, and your arm should be at an angle slightly more than a right angle. Adjust your seat to get the right height.



Location courtesy of Music Is Life, Bournemouth

02 Sit forward

Make sure you're sitting far enough forward on your seat so that you can move your torso, but back enough to feel stable. Your elbows should be slightly in front of your torso when your hands are on the keys.



03 Arc your hands

Your hands should be forming an arc at the keys. Your fingers need to be almost pointing down and not striking the keys flatly, while your wrists should be in line with the rest of your arm. Adjust your seat if you need to.

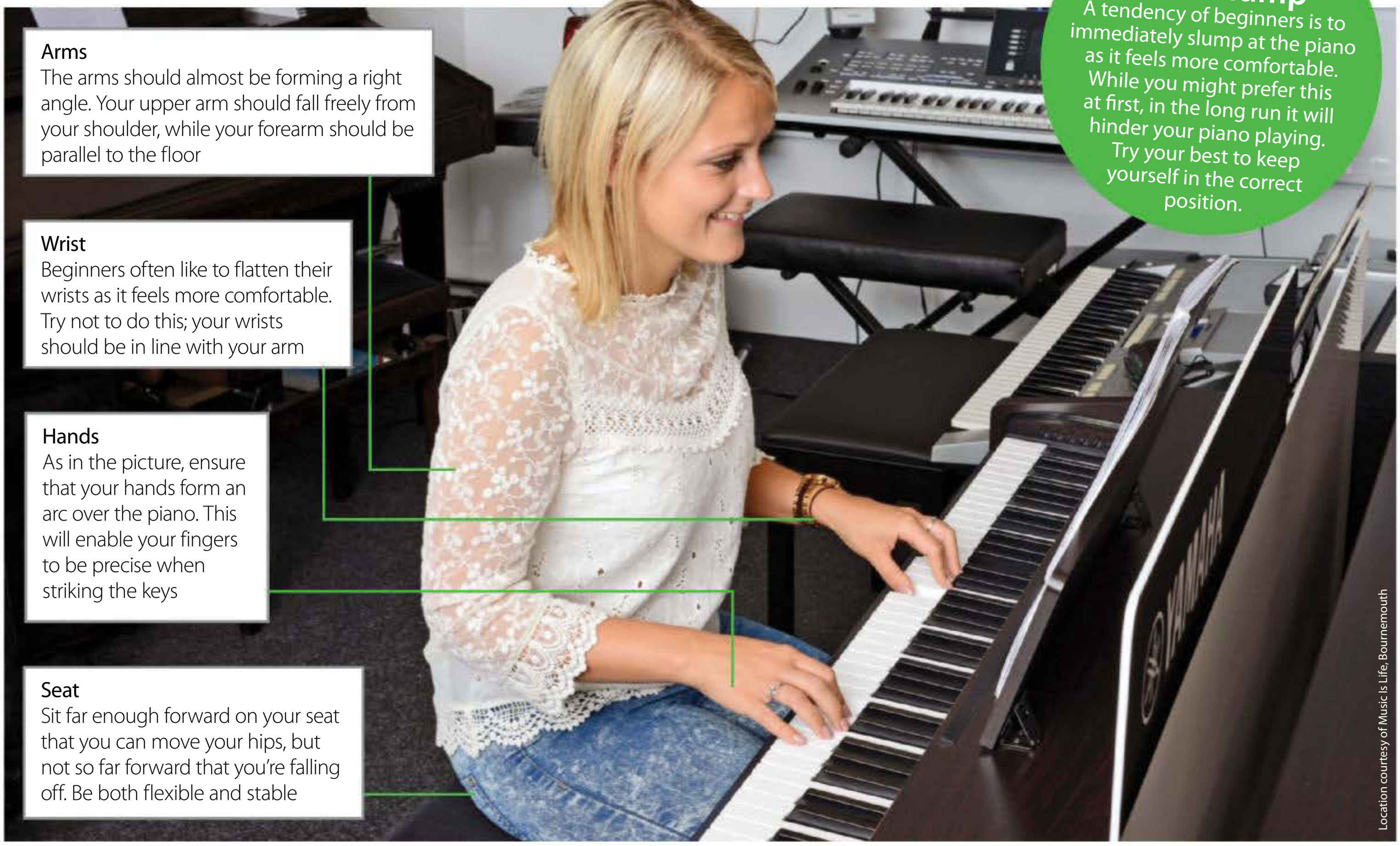


04 Place your hands

If you've followed the previous steps, you should now be in the right position. It may feel a bit odd but you will get used to it. Place your thumbs on the same note (we chose Middle C) and make sure you feel natural.

At the piano

Here we'll show you the correct way to sit at the piano



Location courtesy of Music Is Life, Bournemouth

Arms
The arms should almost be forming a right angle. Your upper arm should fall freely from your shoulder, while your forearm should be parallel to the floor

Wrist
Beginners often like to flatten their wrists as it feels more comfortable. Try not to do this; your wrists should be in line with your arm

Hands
As in the picture, ensure that your hands form an arc over the piano. This will enable your fingers to be precise when striking the keys

Seat
Sit far enough forward on your seat that you can move your hips, but not so far forward that you're falling off. Be both flexible and stable

Top tip

Don't slump

A tendency of beginners is to immediately slump at the piano as it feels more comfortable. While you might prefer this at first, in the long run it will hinder your piano playing. Try your best to keep yourself in the correct position.

Different seats

Choosing or adjusting a seat is key when playing the piano



©Thinkstock

Chair

Make sure your chair is stationary. If it is too low, use hard cushions and pillows to prop yourself up. Sit forward to keep your back straight.



Stool

A major benefit of a stool or bench is that you can't lean back. Use pillows or cushions to raise yourself if you are too low.



Adjustable stool

An adjustable stool is perfect for playing the piano. You can alter the height and you'll also be able to keep your back straight and your hips flexible.

Learn the white keys

Understand the natural keys on your piano or keyboard before you start

Once you've perfected your posture in our previous tutorial, you're almost ready to start playing the piano. The next step is to learn the names of the white keys, where the different keys are located, and how to remember them.

The white piano keys are known as the natural keys, because they sound a natural note as opposed to the sharps and flats of the black notes, which we'll explain in the next section.

The first thing you'll want to do is find Middle C. In the centre of the piano you should see three white keys surrounding two black keys. The furthest left of these three keys is Middle C. As a starting point for beginners put the index finger of your right hand on this key. From here you should find it comfortable to press the keys above Middle C. Now do the same with your left hand, this time pressing the keys below Middle C.

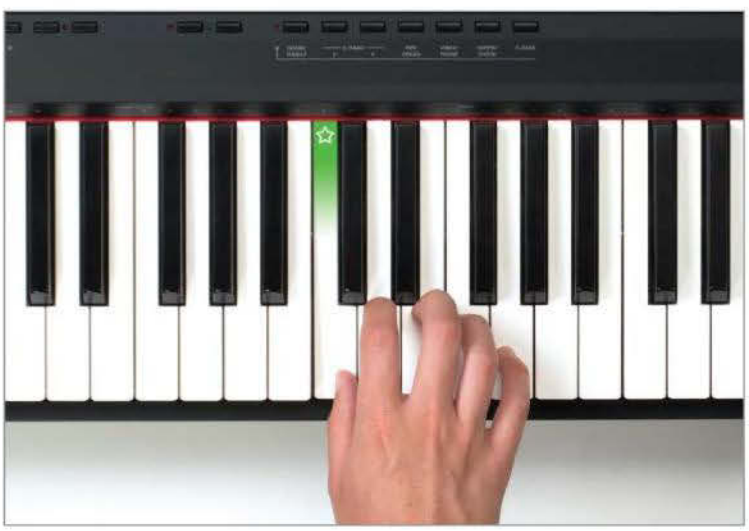
There are seven natural notes on a piano: C, D, E, F, G, A, B. You'll notice that the pattern of two black keys surrounded by three white keys then three black keys surrounded by four white keys repeats itself several times up the keyboard. The keys run in alphabetical order from A to G. The three white notes surrounding the two black keys are C, D, and E, and the four white notes surrounding the three black keys are F, G, A and B. So, if you count eight keys right from Middle C (or, indeed, eight keys left) you'll be back at C. The musical distance between these two notes is what's known as an octave.



"The white keys are known as the natural keys, because they sound a natural note as opposed to the sharps and flats of the black notes"

Your first melodies

Learn to play two basic melodies with these steps



01 Find Middle C on the right hand

With your right hand, locate three white keys in the middle of the piano surrounding two black keys. Place your thumb on the leftmost of these keys; this is Middle C. To the right are D, E, F and G. If you have a full-sized 88-key keyboard, Middle C is the 24th white key you'll count from left to right (the fourth C).



02 Play a right-hand melody

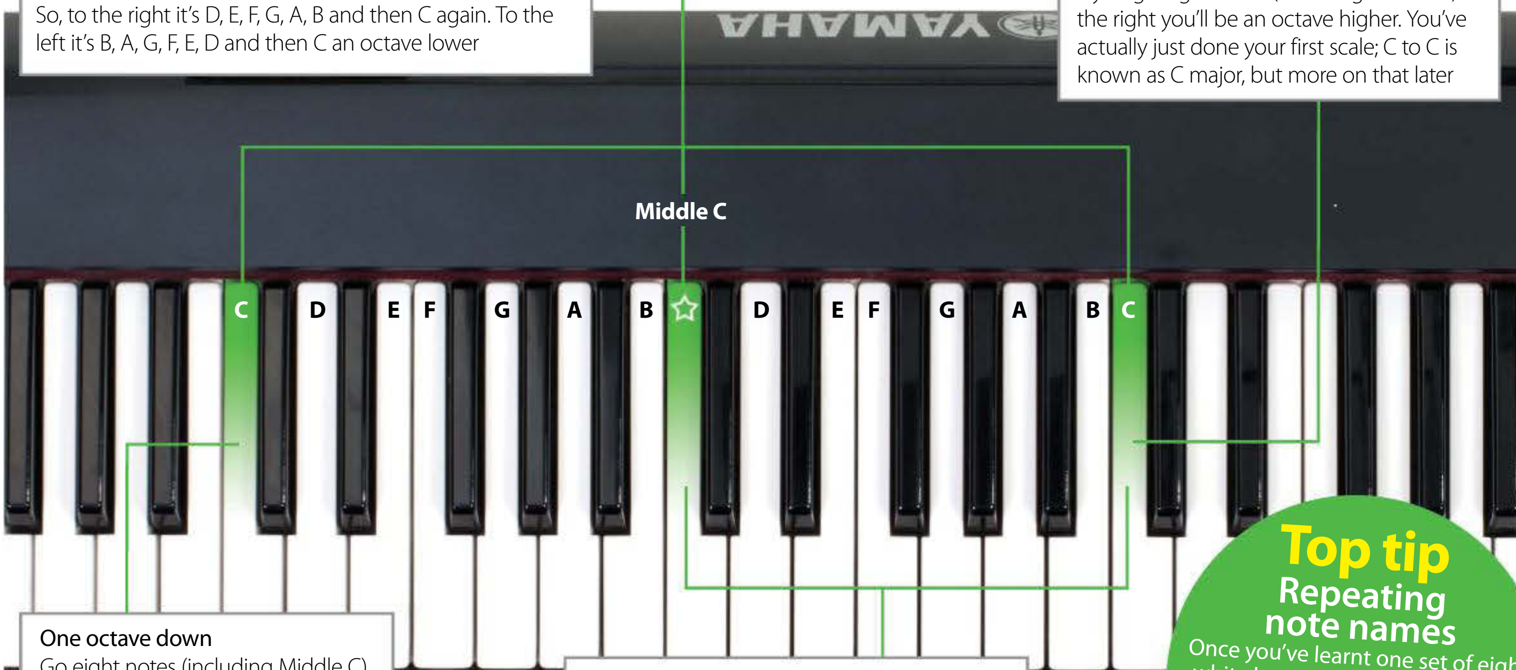
Once you've found where Middle C is, you can have a go at your first basic melody. Try the following tune, which is the first line of *Mary Had A Little Lamb*, and see how you get on: E-D-C-D-E-E-E-D-D-D-E-E-E. Once you've mastered that, see if you can work out the rest.

The white key names

Let's take a look at how the white keys work on a keyboard

Middle C
From Middle C the keys move up and down alphabetically. So, to the right it's D, E, F, G, A, B and then C again. To the left it's B, A, G, F, E, D and then C an octave lower

One octave up
If you go eight notes (including Middle C) to the right you'll be an octave higher. You've actually just done your first scale; C to C is known as C major, but more on that later



One octave down
Go eight notes (including Middle C) to the left and you'll be an octave lower. The three white keys around the two black keys are C, D and E, while the four white keys around three black keys are F, G, A and B

Between C and C
Play the white keys between these two C notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, and C again) and you'll have played the C major scale. Play these notes in any order and it should sound good

Top tip
Repeating note names
Once you've learnt one set of eight white keys, you've learnt them all! The pattern repeats all way up and down the keyboard. The white key to the left of two black keys will always be C, no matter where you are on the keyboard.



03 Find Middle C with the left hand

Again find Middle C, but this time place your left thumb on it. To the left of this key the notes are B, A, G and then F. If you keep going left, you'll arrive at C an octave lower – you won't have enough fingers to go that far though, so you'll have to move your wrist.



04 Play a left-hand melody

Let's try the last line of *Mary Had A Little Lamb* with the left hand. Put your left little finger on Middle C (so you're essentially in the same position as step 2) and have a go at the following: E-D-C-D-E-E-E-E-D-D-E-D-C. Make sure only your little, ring and middle fingers move as they're the only ones that need to.

Learn the black keys

Get acquainted with the world of flats and sharps right here

The black keys on the piano are known as the flat and sharp keys. In technical terms this means they make a note half a step (or a semitone) lower and higher respectively in pitch from their corresponding white key.

You will notice that the black notes are grouped in twos and threes, and taking the time to remember which is which is also a useful way to remember the white keys' names. Each black key acts as both a sharp and a flat. A sharp is a note that's half a step higher than the corresponding white key, and the flats are half a step lower.

First, let's focus on moving to the right from Middle C. The black key immediately to the right is C sharp (C#). This is half a step up from C. Take another half step and you'll be at D. Working in order from Middle C to the right the sharps are C#, D#, F#, G# and A#. B# and E# are C and F respectively, although they are rarely referred to in the former manner. Always remember that sharps are to the right of a note.

Now find Middle C again and this time go left. The first black key is B flat (B♭). Working down in order from Middle C the flats are B♭, A♭, G♭, E♭ and D♭. C♭ and F♭ are B and E respectively, although again they are not usually denoted this way. Flats are always to the left of a note.

> "A sharp is a note that's half a step higher than the corresponding white key"

Take some time learning what the names of the black keys are and see if you can recognise the difference in pitch with their corresponding white key.

Top tip

Tones and semitones

Tones and semitones (or steps and half steps) are common terms to define distance between notes. A semitone is the distance between each key on the keyboard. Each sharp or flat will be a semitone away from its corresponding white key. The distance between E & F and B & C is also a semitone as there are no black keys between them.

Playing the black keys

Let's learn the names of the black keys and try a short melody



01 Black key technique

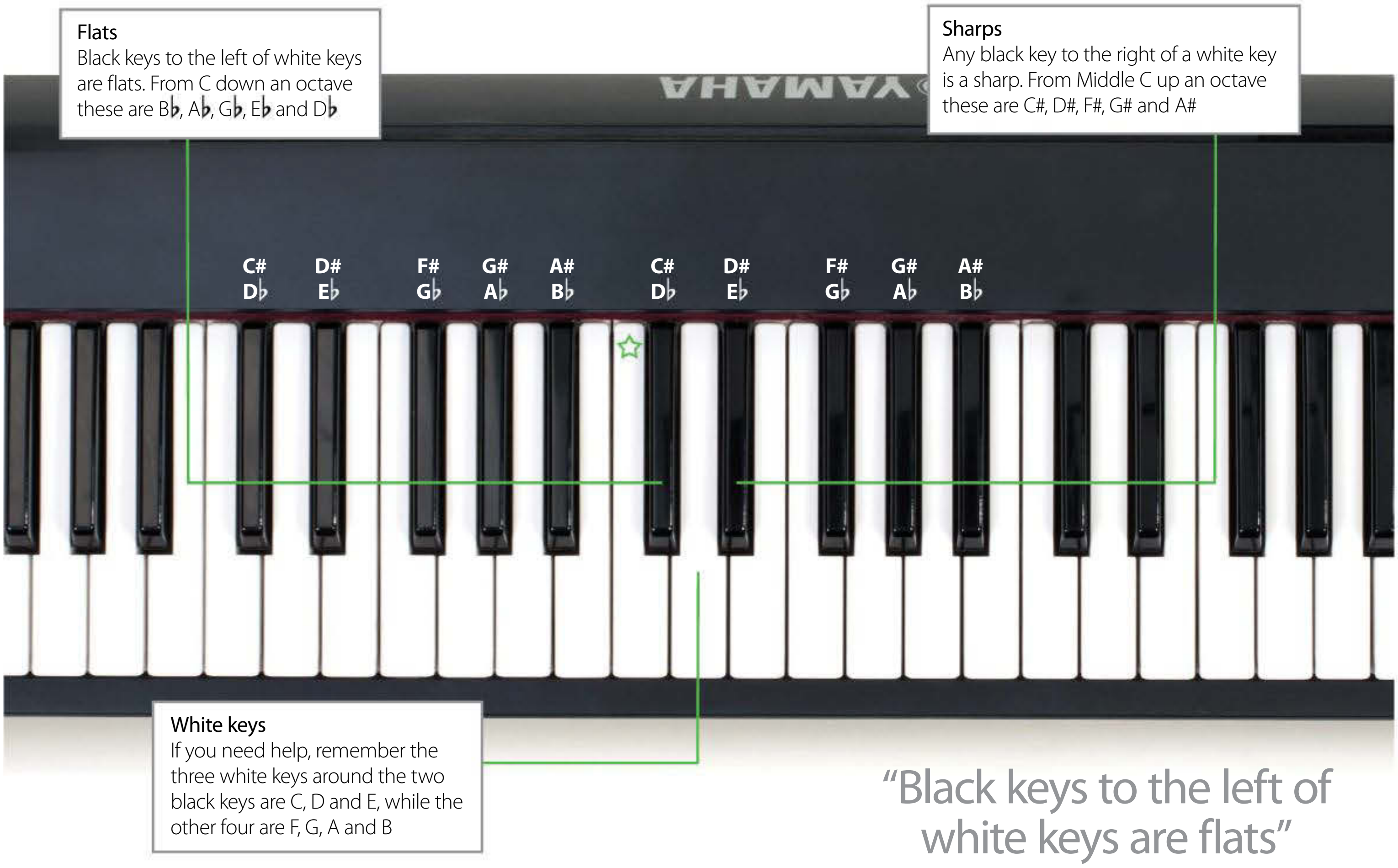
The first thing to get right is your technique. You don't really want to use your thumb on the black keys. Instead, try to only use your middle three fingers. This makes it easier to transition between white and black. There will be times when this is unavoidable, but until this is the case, try to keep your thumb away.



02 Play with the right hand

When playing the black keys you might need to tuck your thumb under your fingers to hit a white key. Try this now – play Middle C with your right index finger, C# with your middle finger and then D with your thumb. Later on, you will find this technique useful when performing scales.

Learn the names Let's make sure we know what the black keys are called



"Black keys to the left of white keys are flats"



03 Play with the left hand

Let's try the same technique with the left hand. Place your left thumb on Middle C. Now play B with your index finger, B♭ with your middle finger and then A with your thumb. Practise until it feels natural. Now your thumb is on A, it frees up the rest of your fingers to play lower notes, both black and white.



04 A quick scale

Let's attempt a scale. Starting with your index finger on your right hand and, working from C to F, see if you can play the white and black keys in a fluid motion. Use your thumb for D, and end with your fourth finger on F. Once you've mastered that, go back down again using the same fingers.

Using the piano's pedals

Advance your playing style by getting to grips with the pedals on the piano

Pedals on a piano are used to create sounds that you could not otherwise achieve with your hands alone. There are two standard foot pedals on a piano. On the left is una corda, and on the right is sustain. Some pianos have an additional middle pedal called the sostenuto. However, this is not used very often.

The una corda pedal is played with your left foot and is known as the soft pedal. It is used to enhance softly played notes and is designed for notes that are required to be played quietly. It will not be as effective in softening louder notes.

The right pedal is the sustaining pedal, also known as the damper pedal, which is used by your right foot. It is used to elongate the sound of a note so that it continues to resonate even when you have let go of the key. The resonance will continue until you lift off from the pedal. This effect is very useful when you need notes to overlap in harmonies or otherwise.

The final middle pedal, if your piano has one, is the sostenuto. It is controlled with your right foot and works similarly to the sustain pedal, but it only sustains certain notes. Hit the notes you want to sustain and depress the pedal; any other note will sound the same. This allows sustained notes to be played alongside regular notes.

How to use the pedals

Learn when to depress and when to lift from the pedals



01 Get your feet in position

You'll need both your feet to use the pedals. You may need to adjust your posture slightly in order to reach all the pedals, but try to retain the perfect posture we outlined earlier.



02 Keep your heel on the ground

When a pedal is played your heel should remain on the ground while the pedal is depressed with the ball of the foot. Don't leave the floor with your heel in a 'stomping' manner.



03 Be gentle

When you release from a pedal, do so gently. This not only makes the notes sound better, but it also prevents an audible knocking noise created by the pedal suddenly lifting upwards.



04 Make sure you practise

Even if your piece of music does not require it, practise with the pedals. Try to transition smoothly between depressions and lifting, and learn how each pedal can be best utilised.

What the pedals do

Find out when and how to use the pedals



When to use them?
When the sustain pedal needs using, you may see an ornate 'Ped' mark underneath the music. An asterisk-like symbol is used when you need to stop sustaining. Alternatively, there may be a direction at the start of the music to use the pedal throughout

Sostenuto
This pedal allows you to add staccato-like effects to your playing while sustained notes resonate in the background

Una corda
This soft pedal allows you to make sounds softer and alters the timbre of notes so that they sound more distant

Sustain
The sustain pedal continues the sound of a note after you have released the key, which makes the note sound deeper, warmer and more intense

Separate pedals

A great option if you play a keyboard

Many modern electronic keyboards are able to replicate the sound of a pedal on a regular piano. To do this the pedal is usually supplied externally. It plugs into the keyboard and simply flicks a switch on the MIDI keyboard. A pedal of this sort is known as a footswitch. Keyboards can have multiple footswitch jacks to enable you to use multiple pedals to produce the same sounds as the three pedals we've outlined above.

If you're using a pedal with a keyboard, try to stick to the same techniques we've discussed elsewhere. As before, keep your heel on the floor (if possible with your pedal) and depress and release the pedal in a gentle manner. This will ensure that, even when using an electronic keyboard, you can retain the same soft or deep sound of a pedal on a regular piano and make your music sound all the better.





"Keep your heel on the floor and depress and release the pedal in a gentle manner"

Understanding theory

Learn how to read musical notation and find out about the different symbols and notes you'll see in sheet music



"Notation is a way of composers expressing to musicians how to play a piece of music through both pitch and rhythm"



Give it a try

Look out for this logo on each page, as it means that an audio and/or video file is available online to help you master a certain technique.

What is musical notation?

Throughout this section we will begin to look at what musical notation is, how to read it and symbols that affect the way we play a piece

Musical notation is a way composers express to musicians how to play a piece of music through both pitch and rhythm. Music is written on a stave which consists of five lines. Notes can be placed either in the spaces or on the lines themselves and represent one of the seven natural notes in music. Musical notes are separated by vertical lines called bar lines. Preceding the musical notes, you will usually find a clef and time signature, and sometimes you may see either a sharp or flat representing a key signature within a particular piece. Above the stave you will almost always find a tempo marking either through a number or an expressive term which will indicate the speed of the piece. Underneath, a composer could add dynamic markings. These show the volume at which they want a particular section of music played.

> "Musical notation… how to play a piece of music through both pitch and rhythm"

Top tip
Practise and repeat

Learning to read music can be quite challenging at first, but the most important thing is practice and repetition. Through these two basic principles, in time you will be able to play through music without having to think about where the notes are first.

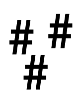
Understanding musical symbols

Our guide to the most common notation



01 Clef

There are various types of clef that you can use in a piece of music. This one is called the treble clef. It tells us the pitch of the notes that have been written. See page 32 for more information.



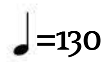
02 Key signature

This will always appear at the beginning of the piece of music. By placing the symbols either in the spaces or lines, it tells us the notes that we should play as flats or sharps. See page 40.



03 Time signature

At the start of a piece of music you will see two numbers, one on top of the other. The top number tells you how many beats in a bar there are; the bottom tells you what type of beat it is. See page 38.



04 Tempo marking

There are several ways of indicating the tempo at the beginning of a piece of music. The two most common are via a written word (usually in Italian) or in this case by how many crotchet beats per minute there are. See page 52.



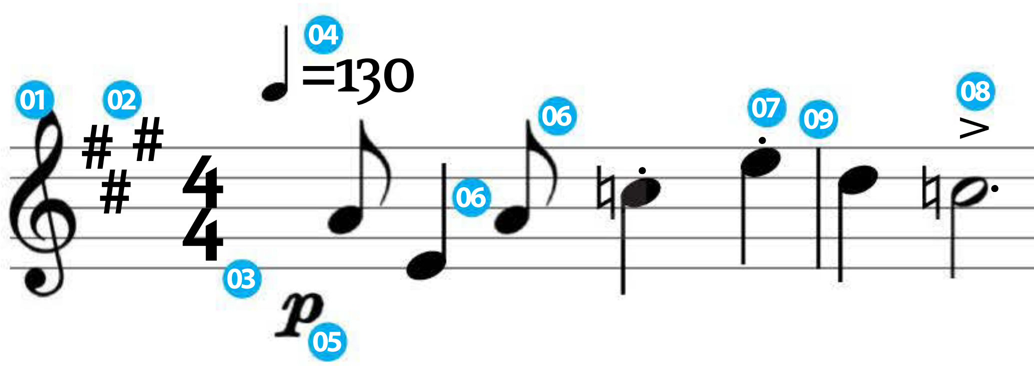
05 Dynamics
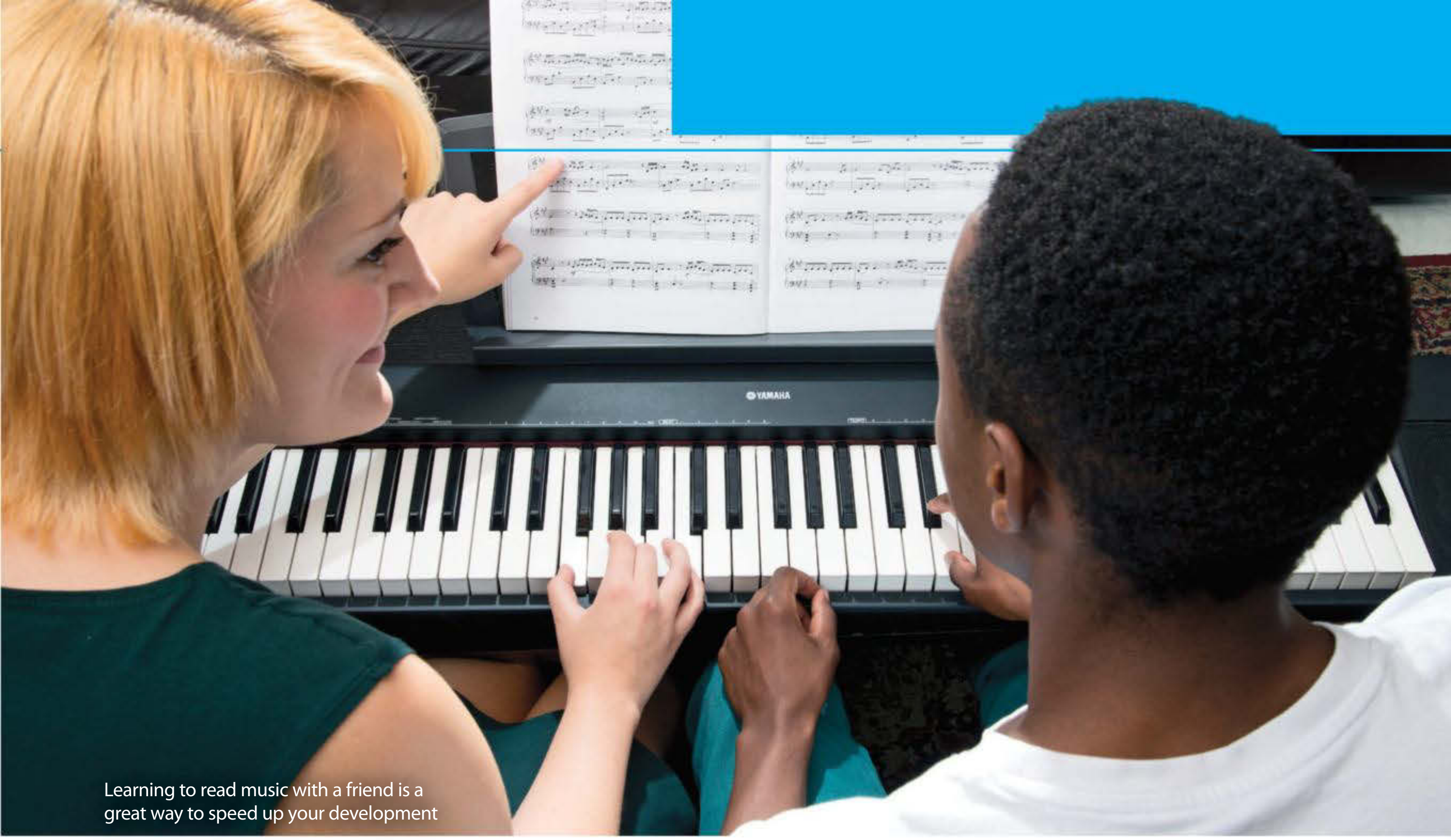
These tell you what volume to play the particular phrase of music at. The two most common are f (forte) which is loud and p (piano) which means quiet. Adding an m (mezzo) before either of the two symbols means moderately. See page 50.



06 Notes

The notes in a strip of music are the symbols that tell you both the rhythm and pitch of the piece of music you are playing. See page 33.





Learning to read music with a friend is a great way to speed up your development

07 Staccato
A dot above a note is a staccato marking. This tells us to play the note slightly shorter than we would normally be directed to.

08 Accent
When you see a horizontal arrow above a note, this is known as an accent. Through this symbol we need to emphasise a note slightly more, making the sound slightly louder. Not to be confused with a decrescendo, which is below a note.

09 Bar line
The bar line divides the notes in to the correct number of beats as indicated by the time signature. There are several different types, including repeats and double barlines, which are used at the end of a piece of music.

10 Tenuto
A single horizontal bold line above or below a type of musical note is a tenuto marking. This explains to us that we should be playing that note to its fullest value.

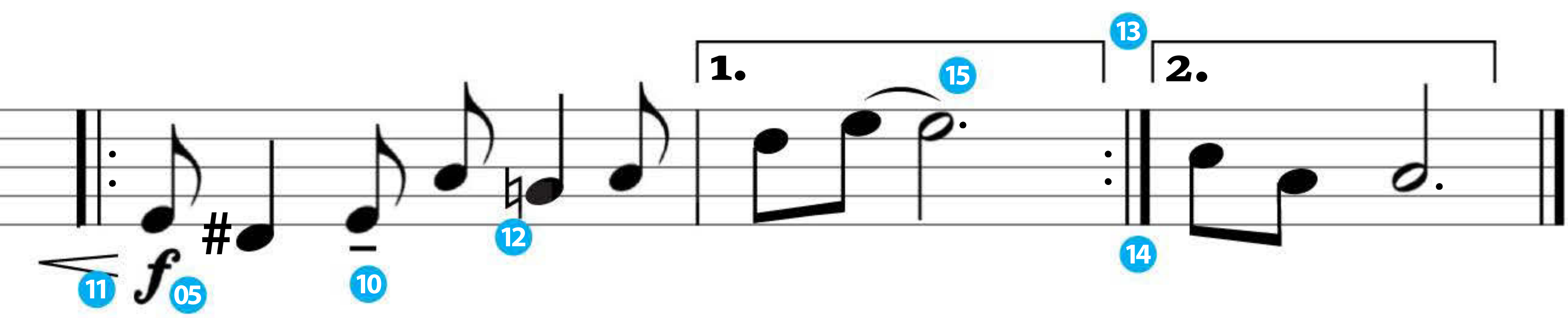
11 Crescendo/ Decrescendo
Similar in look to an accent, but larger and placed under a piece of music, this is a dynamic marking that tells us either to get louder (as in the example) or quieter (the opposite of the example). These could be replaced by the words cresc. or decresc.

12 Accidentals
These symbols are placed in front of the note and will indicate a pitch that is not already shown in the key signature. The three most common types are flats ♭, sharps #, and naturals ♮.

13 1st and 2nd time lines
These will appear above certain bars during a repeated section where, during a repeat, the piece indicates a different ending.

14 Repeat bars
A double barline with two dots means you should repeat the music between the two sets of repeat signs. When it's only a left-facing sign, repeat from the beginning.

15 Tie
Two notes of the same pitch can be tied together with this symbol. The second note should not be played again, but must remain heard.



Introducing the staves

The five horizontal lines that enable us to read music

Staves (or staffs) are some of the most important parts of musical notation – without them we wouldn't have anywhere on which to put the notes we need to play! Staves consist of five horizontal lines with four spaces, with a clef on the left-hand side. Although there are several different clefs throughout the world of music, as pianists we only need to concentrate on the treble clef and bass clef.

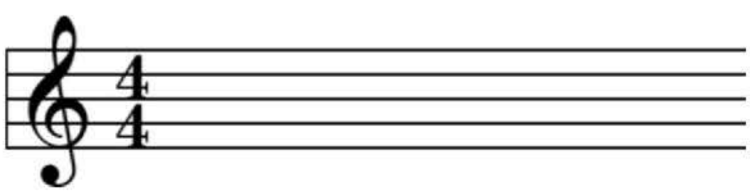
Usually, the treble clef and the stave that it sits on dictate the notes that will need to be played by the right hand, while the bass clef tells you the notes that the left hand should play. However, pianists need to play both right and left-hand parts at the same time, so both treble and bass are joined together by a brace (the curly bracket to the left of the beginning of the staves) to create a grand (or great) stave – the treble stave on top, the bass stave on the bottom. Although many exercises will feature just the single stave, actual piano music will nearly always be written on the grand stave.

While the top stave will almost always have its notes played by the right hand and the bottom stave the left, it is not uncommon for both staves in a grand stave to carry the same clef. If a composer wants a passage of music with both hands playing high up the keyboard then it's a lot easier to write the music for two treble staves.

"Although there are several different clefs, as pianists we only need to concentrate on the treble clef and bass clef"

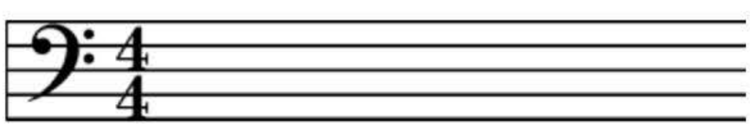
The different staves

The clef dictates which stave is which



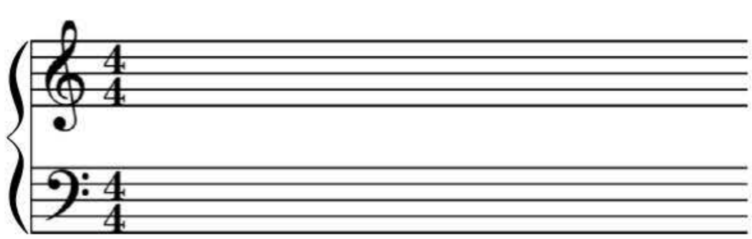
The treble stave

The treble clef stave will usually be the upper of the two staves in a grand stave, and the notes on the treble stave will likely need to be played by the right hand. The treble clef is also known as a G-clef as the curl of the clef passes through the note G on the treble stave – if you're drawing one, this curl is the best place to start from! The clef is also used by several other popular instruments, including the violin, flute and recorder.



The bass clef stave

This clef marks the lower of the two staves on the grand stave, and its notes will often be played by the left hand. It's also known as the F-clef, as the two dots next to the curve are bisected by the note F on the bass stave. Popular instruments whose notation is commonly written on this stave include the cello, double bass and trombone. Note that it's possible for a right-hand stave to carry the bass clef should the music dictate it.



The grand stave

Both the treble stave and bass stave combine to create the grand or great stave – the stave used for almost all Western piano notation. You can tell if the two staves are a grand stave by the curly braces to the left of the stave. This signifies both parts must be played simultaneously. The piano isn't the only instrument that uses a grand stave. Although many aren't diverse enough to necessitate both staves, instruments such as the harp, marimba and celesta use it.

Notes and their values

Some of the different types of notes you'll find on the staves

Notes are the foundation on which Western musical notation is based – without them we wouldn't know what to play or how long to play it for. We know what note to play by its position on the stave, which we'll address in the next tutorial, and we know how long to play it for by the type of note it is.

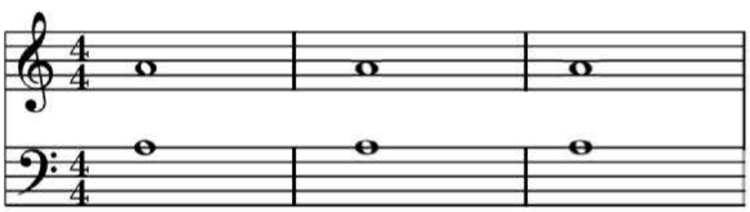
Most notes consist of the note head (the oval-shaped dot) and a stem either pointing up from the right of the head, or pointing down from the left. The only note you're likely to see at this stage that doesn't have a stem is the semibreve/whole note, which is just the note head (see below for more). Quavers/eighth notes and shorter (ie semiquavers/sixteenth notes) also have a 'flag' attached to them, which will always be attached to the right of the note, regardless of its stem direction. As a rule of thumb, single note heads below the middle line of the stave should have an upward-pointing stem, and any above should point down. Stems on single note heads on the middle line can go either way.

So what do these note types tell us? Well, they dictate how long the pianist should play the note for. For example, if a piece of music has a minim/half note on the middle line of the treble clef stave, the pianist should play a B for two beats. Here we run through some of the most common notes that you will find throughout this book.

> "We know what note to play by its position on the stave and we know how long to play it for by the type of note it is"
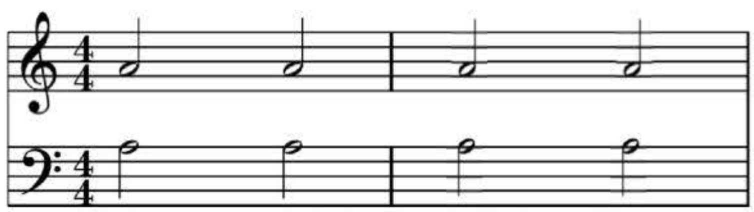
Introducing the notes

Notes and their lengths in simple time
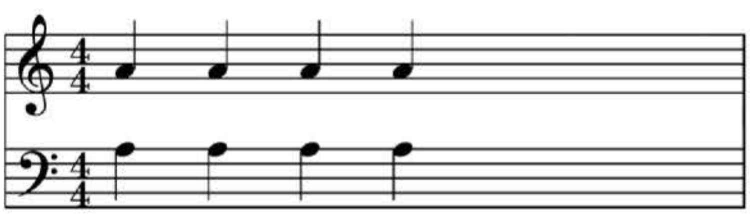


01 Semibreve/whole note

These notes last for four beats which, in a piece of music in 4/4 or common time, is the whole bar. They don't have a stem; rather, they are just a note head resting on the stave.
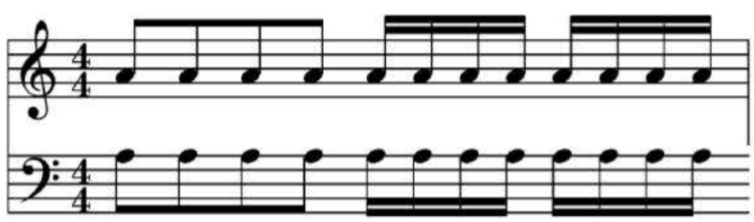


02 Minim/half note

Minims/half notes last for two beats, so two minims in a piece of music in 4/4 time would take up the whole bar. They can be distinguished from other stemmed notes thanks to the 'empty' note head.



03 Crotchet/quarter note

A crotchet or quarter note lasts for one beat, so four would make up a whole bar in 4/4 time. If you are having trouble getting to grips with how long notes last for, it may be best to start with crotchets.



04 Quaver/eighth note & semiquaver/sixteenth note

A quaver/eighth note is half the time value of crotchet/quarter note, and a semiquaver/sixteenth note is half of a quaver. More than one of these in a row can be 'beamed' together so the score doesn't get littered with stems.

How to read musical notation

Learn which notes go where and use simple mnemonics to remember their positions on the staves

If you want to become a successful pianist, you should be able to read musical notation. You should be able to transcribe those dots and squiggles on the stave into beautiful music that flows from your fingertips. Fortunately, once you have got the basics of notation down, it's not too hard to get to grips with. The ultimate goal is to be able to sight read – just take one look at the sheet music and transfer those notes immediately. We've been through what the different types of staves are and what sort of notes you'll find on them, now we need to discover how their positioning on the stave affects what notes you should play.
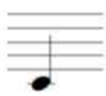
Every white key on your keyboard corresponds to a dot on either a line or a space of one of the staves. For example, if you see a minim/half note on the first line up of the treble clef stave, you should play the E note after Middle C for two beats. If the next note is on the line above it, then you should play a G. If it's in the space between these two lines, then you should play an F. However, the same notes do not transfer to the bass stave. If you see a minim on the first line up for the bass stave, you should play a G rather than an E.

You have to learn two different systems, which can certainly be tricky at first. But with the help of some handy mnemonics and learning tools which we will run through in this tutorial – not to mention a fair amount of practice – you will be reading music in no time.

The piano's keyboard

What the staves correspond to

Middle C
The most important note on the keyboard doesn't rest on either stave, it occupies a ledger line



The next C
This note is also named C, but it is not Middle C. Every 12 semitones the A-G pattern recycles – there are eight different Cs on a full-size keyboard



Bass stave white keys
Each of these white keys has a line or space on the bass stave. The G rests on the bottom line, and the A rests on the top line

Treble stave white keys
Each of these white keys has a different place on the treble stave, whether it is on a line or a space. The E rests on the bottom line, and the F on the top. Notes higher or lower will rest on ledger lines outside of the stave

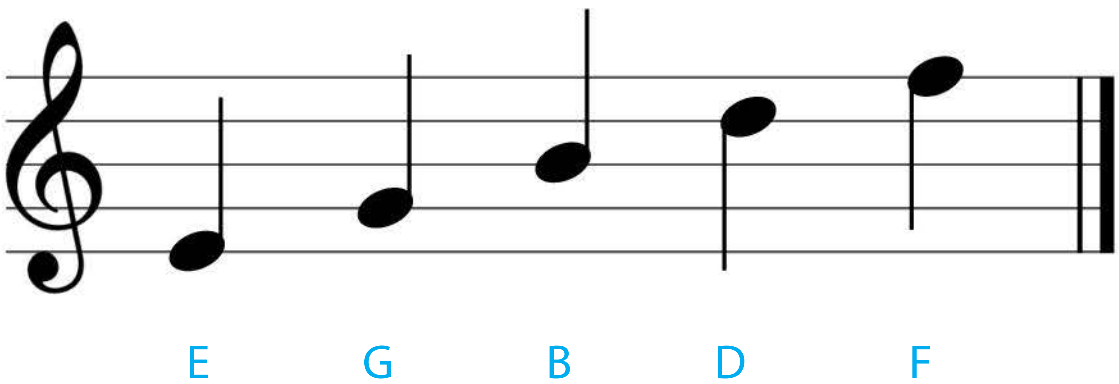
The treble stave notes

What your right hand will be playing

Usually, notes written on the treble clef stave will be played by your right hand, and they often (but not always) carry the main tune of the piece. Strangely, the most important note on the keyboard, Middle C, doesn't actually belong on either the treble or bass clef – it rests on a ledger line on both, which we will talk more about in the future. The first line up carries the E note, which is two white keys to the right of Middle C. The following eight white keys each occupy either a space of a line on the treble clef stave – up to the F note on the following octave. The notes don't stop there, however. Each subsequent note will either rest in or above ledger lines that, in theory, can go as high as the sheet music will allow. Ledger lines can also go below the stave – like Middle C – but any below the A note to the left of Middle C will probably be played on the left hand, or the stave's clef will change to the bass clef.

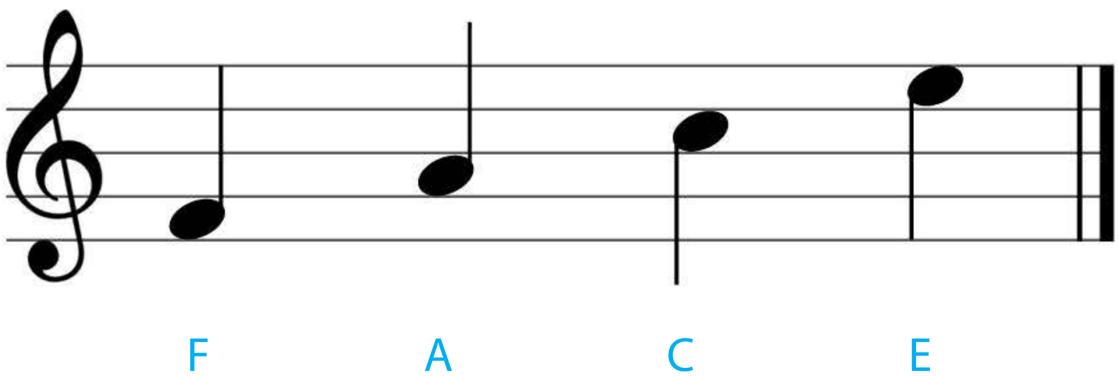
The lines

The notes on the lines of the treble clef stave are, from bottom to top: E, G, B, D, F. There are many ways to remember this, but most use a simple mnemonic like Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit. You may find it easier to remember if you make up your own – especially if your name begins with one of those letters. If that fails, remember that the B note is 'Bang' in the middle.



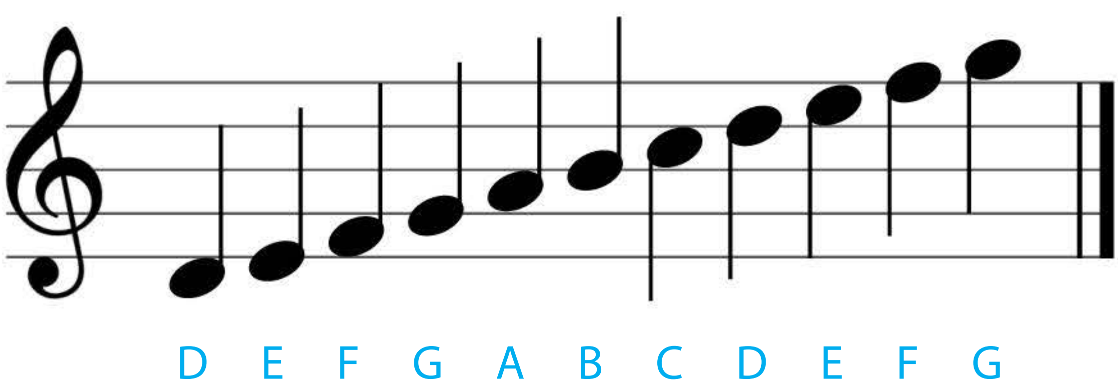
The spaces

Although you could think of one, there's no need for a mnemonic to help you remember the notes for the spaces of the treble clef stave. From bottom to top, they spell out the word 'FACE', which even rhymes with 'space'! Note that the C in FACE is not Middle C – it is the C note one octave above it. The F in E, G, B, D, F (ie the top line of the stave) is one octave above the F in FACE (the first space from the bottom).



All together

The white notes all have their special place on the stave, so how do we know to play black notes? Well, they're either preceded by a symbol or they're dictated by a key signature, which we'll go through later. Some of the black notes have different names, but are in fact the same note. F sharp (F#, the black note immediately following the F in FACE) is the same as G flat (Gb), for example. Also included here are the D and G notes, either side of the treble clef stave.



The bass stave notes

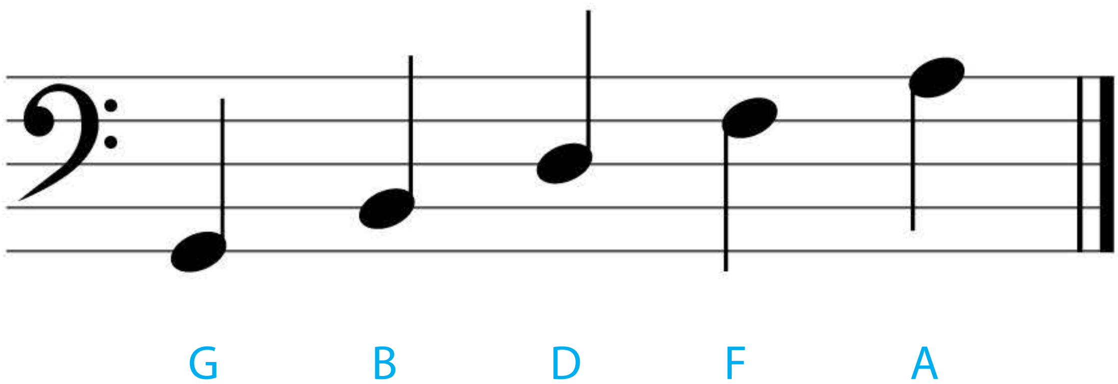
Don't forget the left hand

It might not be the star of the show, but if composers ignored the left-hand parts of piano music it would be very boring indeed! The bass clef tends to carry all notes to the left of Middle C (although ledger lines enable higher notes to belong on the bass clef stave too). But, like the treble clef, Middle C actually rests on a line outside of the stave, on a ledger line. On this occasion it rests on the first ledger line above the bass stave. The first line up on the bass clef stave is G, ten white notes to the left of Middle C. It goes all the way to A, which is only two notes below Middle C. Of course, ledger lines enable notes to go below the bass stave too.

Left-hand parts might not always be as intricate as right-hand parts, but it's still important that you learn which notes are which so you'll be able to provide vital accompaniment to your melodies.

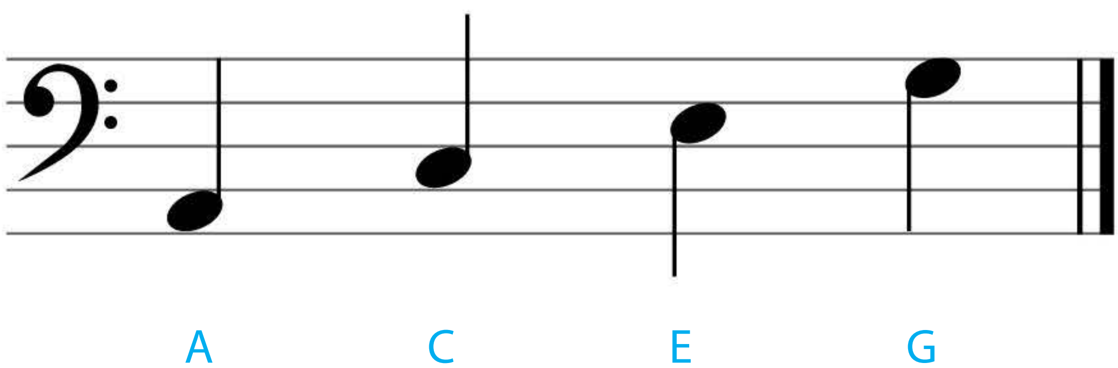
The lines

The lines on the bass stave read G, B, D, F, A. As a mnemonic, you could continue the theme we used for the line notes on the treble stave, with Good Boys Deserve Fruit Always. If you think you may get confused between the two, then thinking up your own will help you remember. Middle C is a 'line' above this stave, two white notes to the right of the A on the top line.



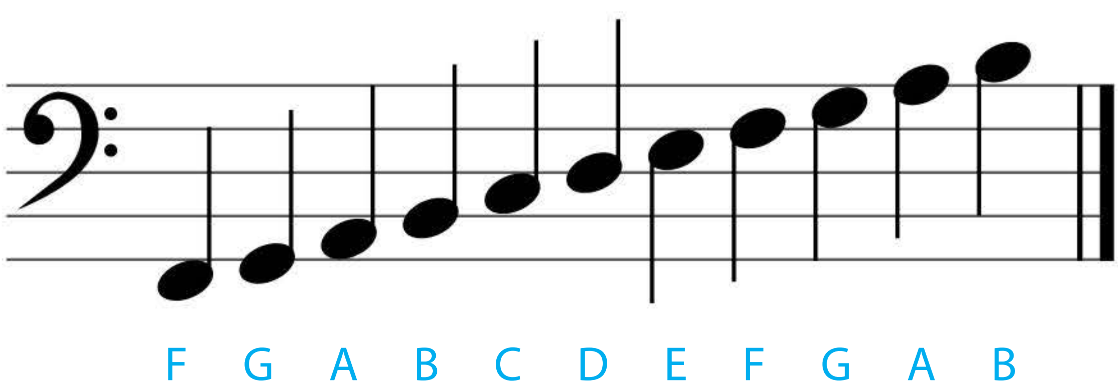
The spaces

Unfortunately, the four notes in the spaces on the bass stave don't spell out any body parts this time – ACEG. You can, however, remember them with All Cows Eat Grass, or something less animal-based if you would prefer! If remembering them from bottom to top isn't doing it for you, there's nothing wrong with trying top to bottom – it's whatever works. The C in ACEG is the C an octave below Middle C.

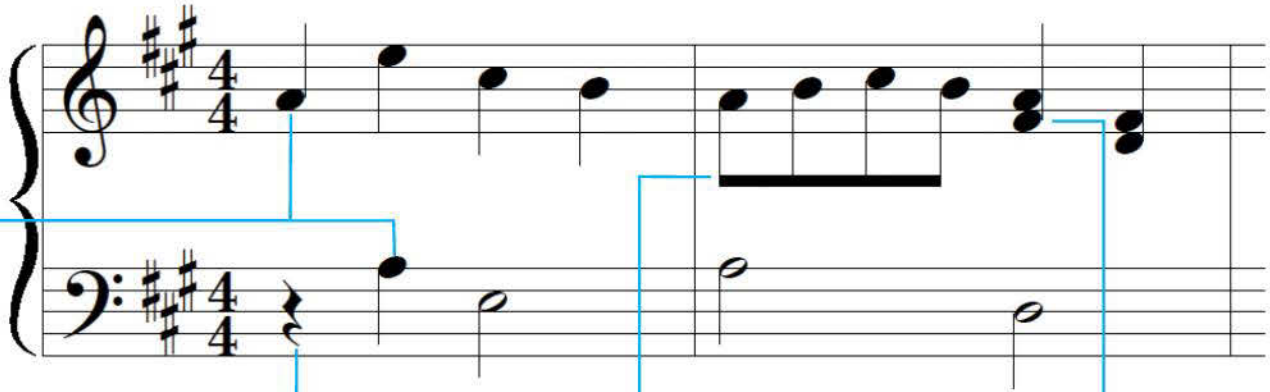


All together

There's no mnemonic for all the notes together on the bass stave but if you remember that the first space up on the stave is A, then you can use alphabetic order to work out the notes going up the stave – just remember to return to A after reaching G! Although theoretically you can use ledger lines to play any note on the bass stave, you're unlikely to see anything past the G after Middle C (a note that's three ledger lines high).



An example of music
How it looks in practice



The notes
These notes are both As, one octave apart. The treble stave note is the A five white keys to the right of Middle C; the bass stave note is the A two white notes to Middle C's left. Remember FACE and All Cows Eat Grass!

Rests
This squiggly symbol is crotchet/quarter note rest. This means that no music is to be played for a beat. See below for more

Beamed quavers/eighth notes
These four notes are quavers/eighth notes. They're worth half a beat each, so the four together make up two beats

Stacked notes
More than one note sharing the same stem means that they are to be played at the same time

Introducing rests

As with musical notes, sometimes in music we need times of silence. These are represented by different symbols called rests

There are several different types of rests. Each rest relates to its note equivalent. This chart shows the most common types.

"There are several different types of rests. Each rest relates to its note equivalent"

Type of rest	Note	Length of rest
		4 beats
		2 beats
		1 beat
		1/2 a beat

How to use rests in music

Rests in action…

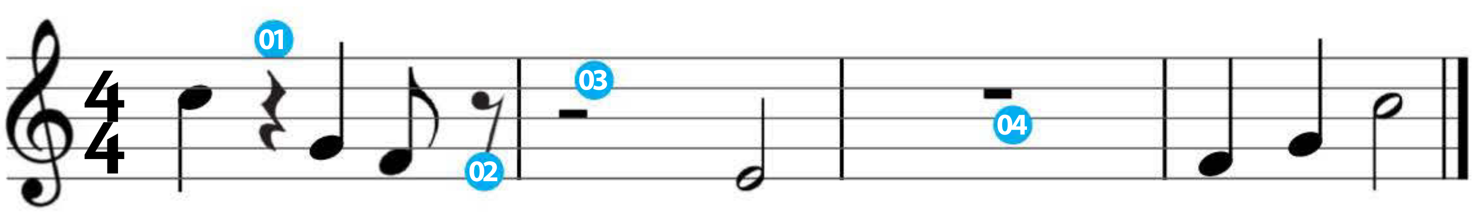
In music where the time signature is 4/4 the rests can be used in this way:

01 Crotchet/ quarter rest
Crotchet/quarter rest for one beat.

02 Quaver/eighth rest
Quaver/eighth rest for half a beat.

03 Minim/half rest
Minim/half rest for two beats (note it sits above the line).

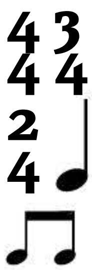
04 Semibreve/ whole rest
Semibreve/whole rest for one beat (note this rests underneath the line).



Understand time signatures

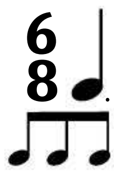
There are many different ways of changing the beats of the bar through time signatures, and each has its own distinct feel and style

A time signature will always be found at the beginning of a piece of music directly after the key signature. It is very important as it tells us exactly how to divide the beats of the bar, in turn making it so much easier to read a piece of music. There are two main types of time signature: simple time and compound time. Here's a bit more about them.



Simple time

Simple time is a signature where the main beat is divided into two equal beats. For instance, in 4/4 time, the main beat is a crotchet/quarter note, and this can be divided in two quavers/eighth notes. The most common forms of simple time signature are 4/4, 3/4 (most often used in waltzes) and 2/4 (considered a march beat).



Compound time
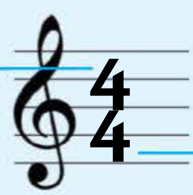
Compound time, much like simple time, is where the main beat can be divided into three beats. The lowest number is most commonly an 8. For example, in 6/8, where the main beat is a dotted crotchet/quarter note, this can be split into three quavers/eighth notes. You're likely to see one of these signatures in a ballad or jig.

"There are two main types: simple time and compound time"
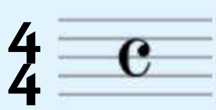
Explaining time signatures

What do the numbers mean and why are they important?

Time signatures comprise two numbers, one on top of the other. The top number (also known as the numerator) will indicate how many beats are in a bar, the bottom number (the denominator) will tell you what type of beat it is. The most common numbers found at the bottom of a time signature are 4 (crotchet), 8 (quavers), and 16 (semiquavers).



The numbers in time can also be replaced by a symbol that looks like a C. This is called common time, but also tells us that there are 4 crotchet beats to a bar.



Simple time

2/4 is mainly used for marches and polka music.

3/4 where the pulse is 3 crotchet beats to a bar is essentially used for waltzes.

4/4 or common time (C), is the most widely used of the time signatures and is used in a variety of music including pop and rock.

Compound time
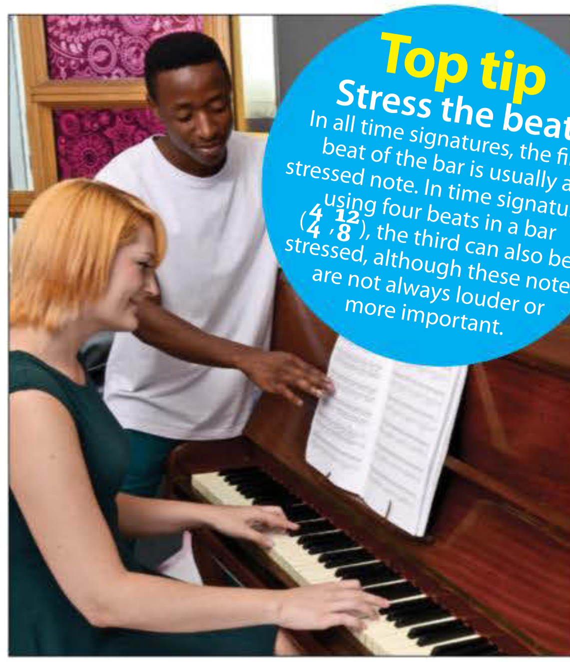
6/8 9/8 are most commonly found in various types of folk music.

12/8 is quite common in slower blues music and, again, also used in folk music.

Dots and ties

Understand exactly what is meant by dots and ties

A dot tells you that you add half the value of the note to its original value. For example, the dotted crotchet (♩.) is 1 + ½ =1½ beats. A tie tells you to add two note values together. For example, a crotchet plus another crotchet would be two beats and look like this: ♩♩. You would most likely use a tie when you need a note to carry over into the next bar. If a minim doesn't fit in a bar, then you can tie two crotchets on either side of the bar line.



Top tip

Stress the beat

In all time signatures, the first beat of the bar is usually a stressed note. In time signatures, using four beats in a bar (4/4, 12/8), the third can also be stressed, although these notes are not always louder or more important.

Beats in a bar

If we take 4/4 as an example, there are several ways in which notes can be used in each bar

01 First bar

In the first bar we have used four crotchets/quarter notes, each worth one beat, to complete the four beats needed.

02 Second bar

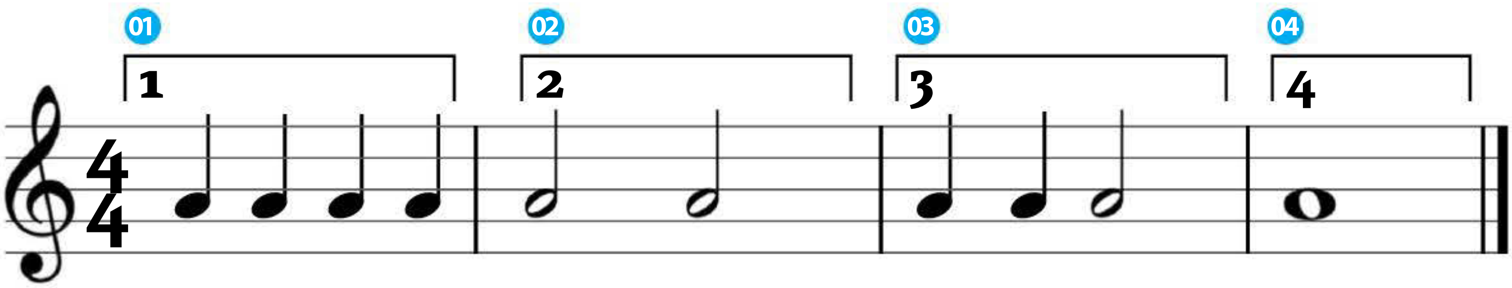
The second bar uses two minims/half notes, each worth two beats, which will once again total the four we are after.

03 Third bar

In the third bar, we have used a combination of both crotchets/quarter notes and minims/half notes to total the four beats required.

04 Fourth bar

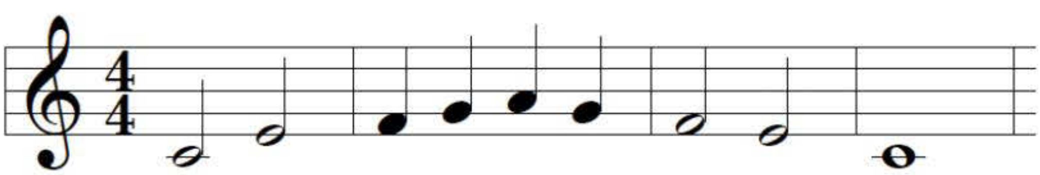
Alternatively, we can fill an entire four-beat bar with a semibreve/whole note to get exactly the same effect, as shown below in the fourth bar.



"We have used a combination of both crotchets/quarter notes and minims/half notes to total the four beats required"

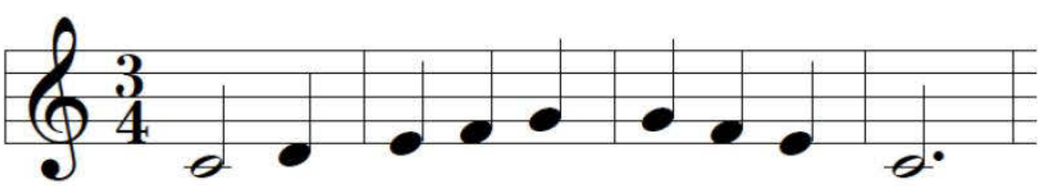
Time signature examples

Common time signatures seen throughout the book



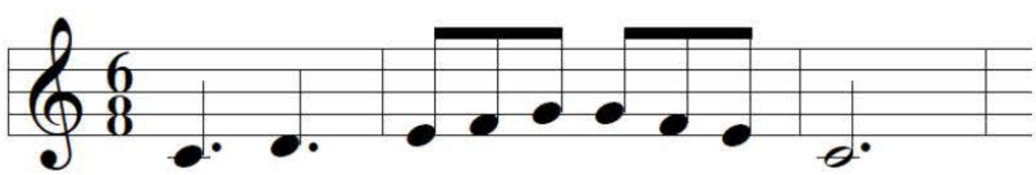
4/4 time

The most common time signature, 4/4 time consists of four crotchet/quarter note beats. As long as the number of beats in a bar totals 4, you can have whatever combination of notes you please – a semibreve/whole note will take up a bar on its own.



3/4 time

This time signature dictates that there are to be 3 crotchets/quarter notes to a bar. A dotted minim/half note will take up the whole bar as it lasts for 3 beats: 2 beats of the minim/half note and 1 beat for its dot, which adds half of the note's original length.



6/8 time

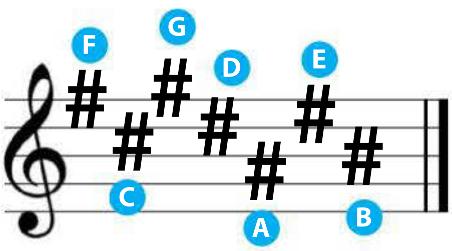
6/8 time comprises six quaver/eighth note beats in a bar, which we have done here in the second bar of our example. Emphasis is placed on the first and fourth beats, which means it's perfect for upbeat jigs and, with a slower tempo, ballads.

Interpret key signatures

Explore the role of key signatures in music, learn why they are needed and how to read them

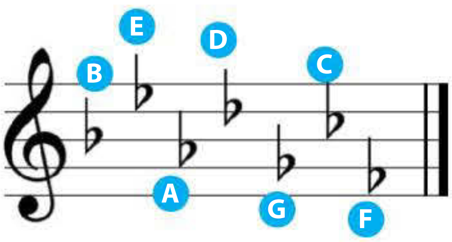
Key signatures are shown at the beginning of a piece of music and are either a series of sharps or flats. You will see a key signature immediately after the clef in a piece of music, and this saves the composer from having to add them after each required note. They explain two things; firstly, the key the piece is in and secondly, which of the notes you play as either sharps or flats. The order that sharps and flats are placed in a key signature will always remain the same. There are two mnemonics that we can use to help us remember these orders on a treble clef stave. For sharps we can use:

Father Charles Goes Down And Ends Battles

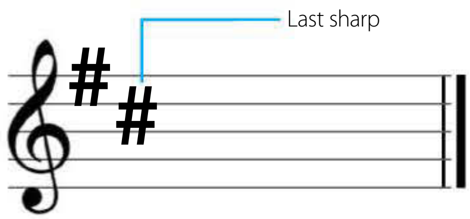


For flats we can use:

Battle Ends And Down Goes Charles' Father

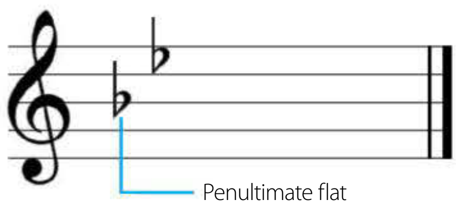


So, how do we work out a major key from the key signature? If there are no sharps or flats, it's C major. For sharps, you must look at the last one in the signature. If you move it one semitone up it will be the first note and the name of the major key. The example below is D major.



For flats, you have to remember that F major has one flat (Bb). For all other key signatures using two or more flats, the penultimate flat will tell you the name of the major key.

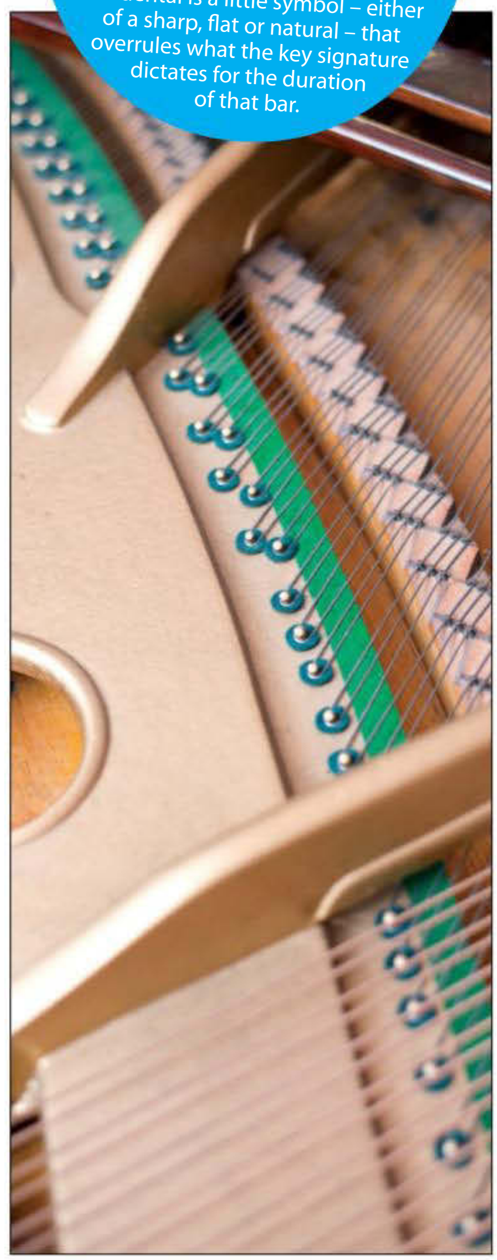
The penultimate flat in this example is a B. This key signature is Bb major.



> "Key signatures are shown at the beginning of a piece of music"

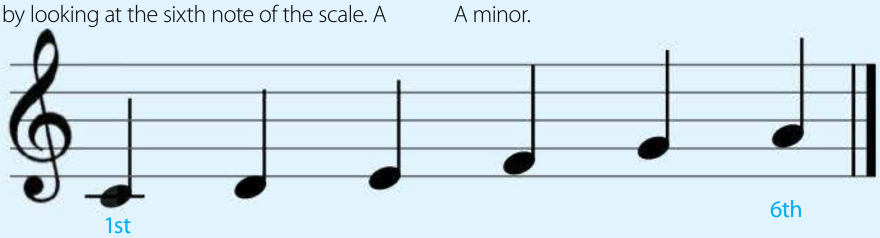
Top tip
Accidentals

Don't think that just because you're playing or composing in a specific key signature that you need to use those sharps and flats. You can use accidentals to play notes that don't belong in the signature. An accidental is a little symbol – either of a sharp, flat or natural – that overrules what the key signature dictates for the duration of that bar.



Changing to minor
It's all relative
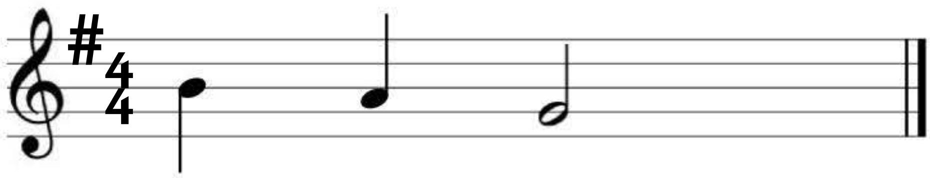
The sound of the piece of music will tell you if it is a major (happy) of minor (sad) key. You can work out the name of the relative minor key to a major key by looking at the sixth note of the scale. A relative minor will have the same key signature as its major key. This example of C major shows A as the sixth note, so C major's relative minor is A minor.



Keys Identifying key signatures
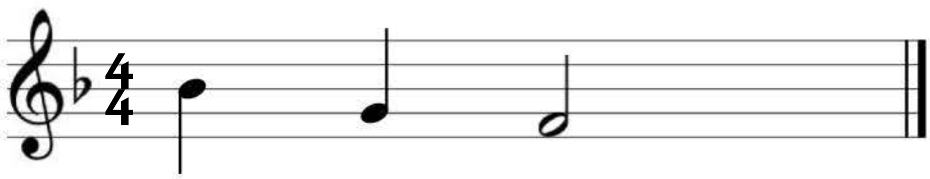
01 Key signatures using sharps

Sometimes you might see a sharp (#) in the key signature. It will be either placed on a line or on a space of the stave. This tells you to raise the note by one semitone. This signature has one sharp (F), so the piece is in G major or E minor.
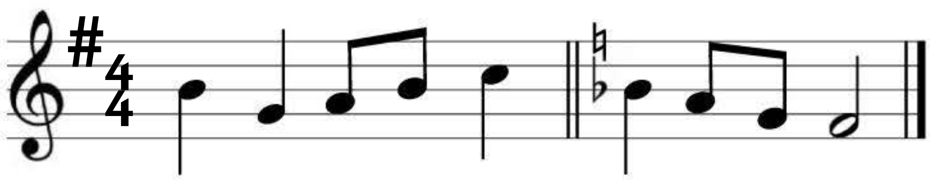


02 Key signatures using flats

Alternatively there may be a flat sign at the beginning of the music. Again, this can either be in a line or space, but this time you lower the note by a semitone. This key signature has one flat, so the piece is either in F major or D minor
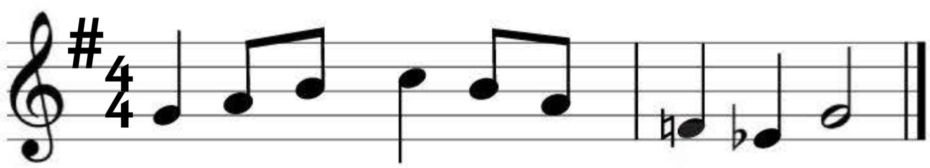


03 Adding naturals into key signatures

You may see a natural sign (♮) in a key signature. This happens most often when a piece of music changes key. This sign cancels either the sharp or flat used in the previous key signature.

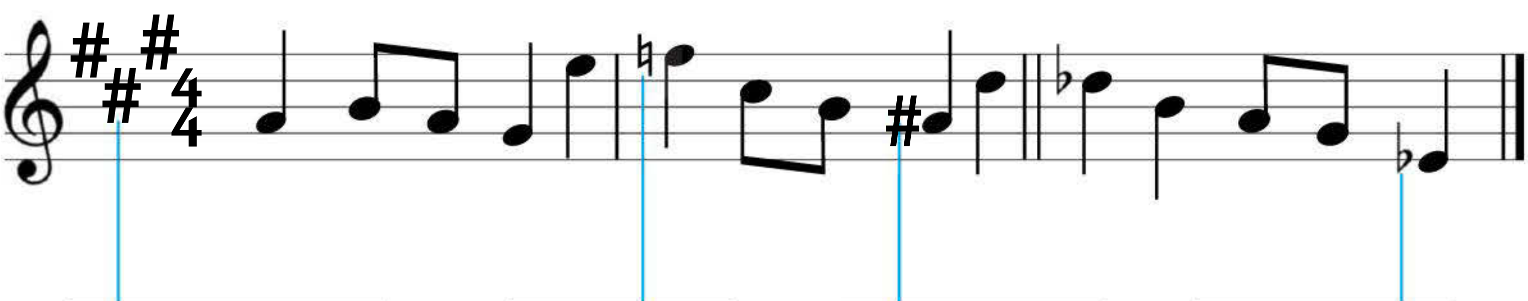


04 Using accidentals in a piece of music

Some musical notes may contain either a sharp, flat or natural sign in front of them that may be different from the key signature. This tells you to change that note according to the sign.



Key signatures in action Here is a recap on what we have learned so far



Key signature
A key signature will be found at the beginning of a piece of music or can also be changed half-way through

Naturals
A natural sign will cancel either a sharp or flat on a note within a piece

A sharp
A sharp can be found either in a key signature or on its own, and raises a note by a semitone

A flat
A flat can again be found in both the key signature or a note and lowers it by a semitone

> "Some musical notes may contain either a sharp, flat or natural sign in front of them that may be different from the key signature"

Learn about ledger lines

Get to grips with these essential parts of music notation with our simple step-by-step guide

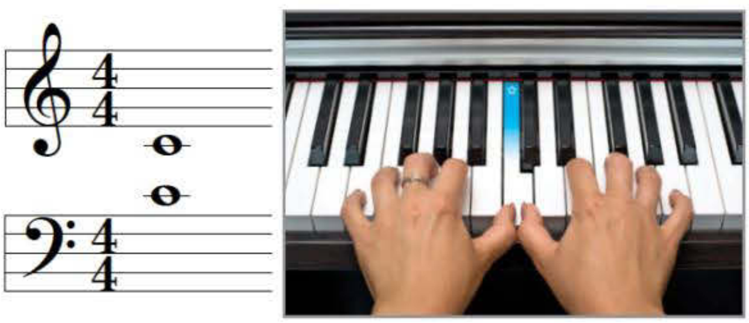
When you're looking at a piece of music to play on the piano, you'll notice that the treble clef and the bass clef are joined together with a bracket on the left-hand side. This is called the grand stave and makes it possible for you to read the music to play on the keyboard with both your left and right hands simultaneously. However, as there are more notes on the piano that can fit on the treble, bass or even grand stave, we need ledger lines to help. These are lines that work to extend either the treble stave or bass stave's five lines in order to represent notes that appear either above or below the stave.

For example, Middle C appears below the five main lines of the treble clef, yet it appears above the five main lines of the bass clef. So, to help you recognise the note, a ledger line is placed through the notehead, spaced equally relative to the lines in the main stave. Middle C is then placed on the 'imaginary' line above or below the stave.

Many other notes will appear in your sheet music with ledger lines. Much higher notes will appear above the treble stave, notes in the middle of the range will appear on ledger lines in the middle of the grand stave and very low notes you'll see drop down below the bass stave.

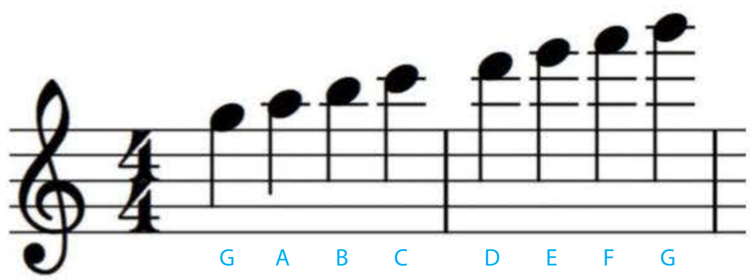
Line it up

How to recognise, play and use ledger lines



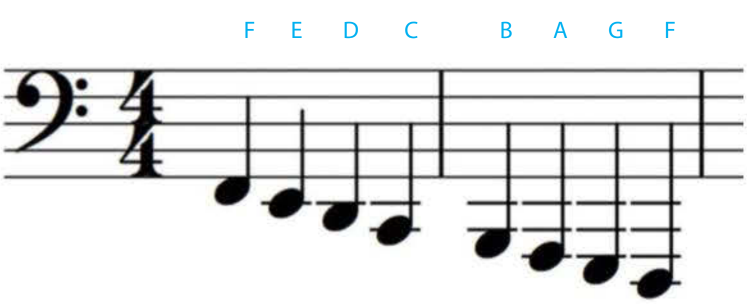
01 Middle C

The best place to start is to find Middle C. This is the first note to be placed on a ledger line below the treble stave or above the bass stave. On our example, you can see that Middle C can appear in two locations, but it's the same note.
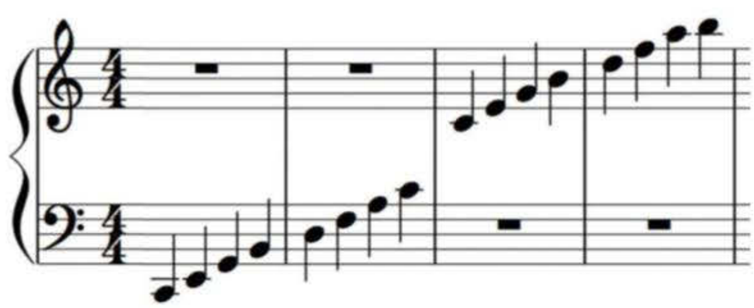


02 On the treble clef

Ledger lines on the treble clef begin to crop up after G, which rests above the top line of the stave. Work out which note to play by checking its position on the ledger line and lines below it.



03 On the bass clef

If you take a look at the bass clef, you'll see that ledger lines will be present below the stave after the note F, which rests beneath the last line of the bass clef's five. These notes can go rather low.



04 On the piano

Think about the notes on the bass clef (plus ledger lines) as keys on the left of the piano keyboard, the ledger lines in the middle as notes in the centre, and notes on the treble clef as notes on the right of the keyboard.

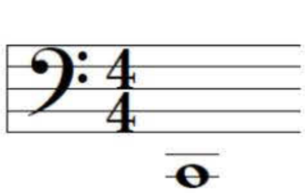
On the keyboard

See how notes on ledger lines translate to notes on your piano

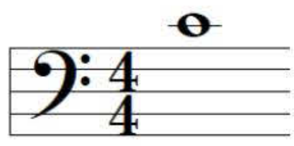
Top tip
Which hand to use?

If you see Middle C on a ledger line below the treble stave, play it on the piano with your right hand. If it has a ledger line above the bass stave, play with your left hand.
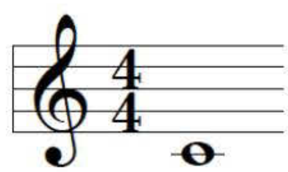




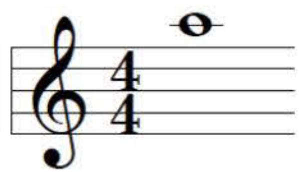
Down low
This note with two ledger lines is in fact C. Going from left to right along the keyboard, it's the second C you'll see – two octaves below Middle C



Middle C – bass clef
The most important note on the keyboard can be notated on both staves. On the bass stave Middle C is positioned one ledger line above the stave



Middle C – treble clef
One ledger line below the treble stave is where Middle C can be found too. When it appears here it is usually played by the right hand

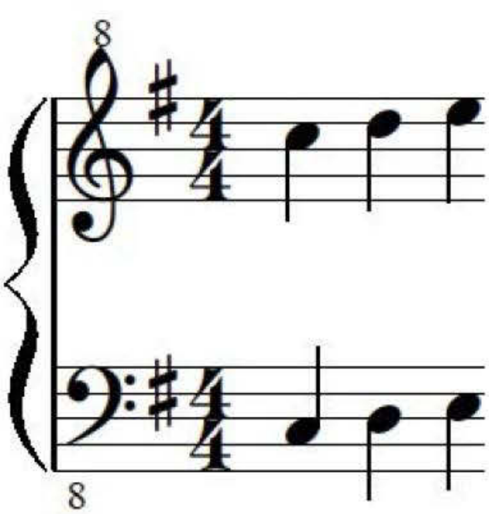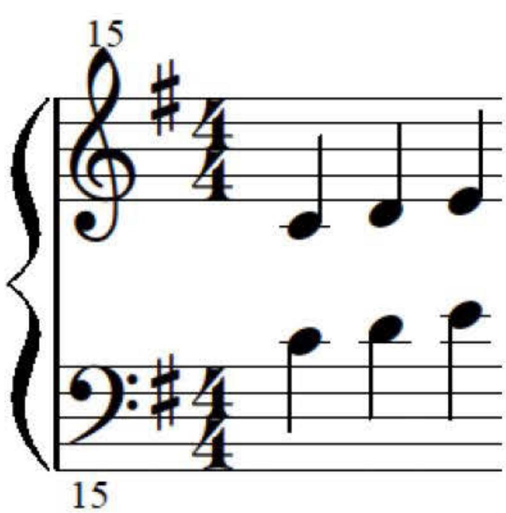


Up high
You will often see ledger lines above the treble clef stave. This note is A (the second A above Middle C) and it rests on the first ledger line above the stave

Octave clefs

Signs you'll see to keep things simple

Too many ledger lines can get confusing, so if the music calls for notes that are very high or very low in pitch, the composer can use different clefs to help. If you see the number 8 above a treble clef or below a bass clef, this means that the notes must be played an octave higher or lower respectively. If the notes need to be really high or low, a '15' can be used above or below the clefs. Our two examples actually tell the pianist to play the same notes, despite the different places on the staves. On the '15' example, the C notes are in Middle C's position on the stave, but is actually the C two octaves higher and lower.





Change note lengths

Learn how the duration of notes can be modified with dots and ties, and how they fit within multiple time signatures

To properly understand what notes that use dots and ties mean, you first need to brush up on signatures and note duration.

The pace of a piece of music is governed by its time signature. You can see this symbol at the start of any stave, right next to the treble or bass clef. It is usually two numbers such as 4/4 placed on top of one another, but it can differ. The stave is divided up into bars, and so the time signature defines the type and amount of notes (so how many beats) that each bar contains.

Different notes have different durations. A 4/4 time signature means that a bar needs to contain note values in each bar that combine to equal 4 beats, for example four crotchets/quarter notes.
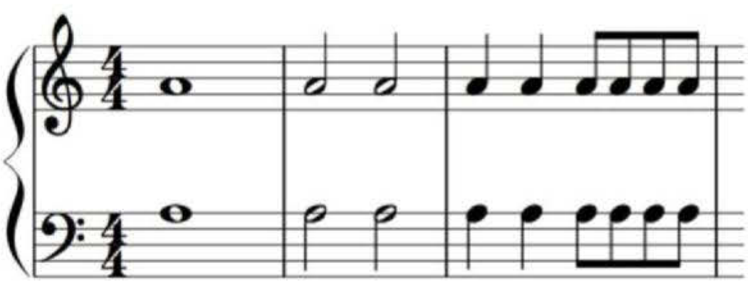
This is where dots and ties come in. Both work to alter the length of a specific type of note. An 'augmentation dot' is, rather neatly, a small dot that appears next to a note and instructs you to increase that note's duration by half. For example, if you saw a dotted crotchet/quarter note, you would need to play the length of the crotchet/quarter note plus half of that duration again (so a half of a crotchet/quarter note would be an eighth of a semibreve/whole note).

Ties, on the other hand, work to merge notes of the same pitch. They appear as curved lines which link notes together and can let the duration of notes travel across barriers, such as bars.

> "Dots and ties work to alter the length of a specific type of note"
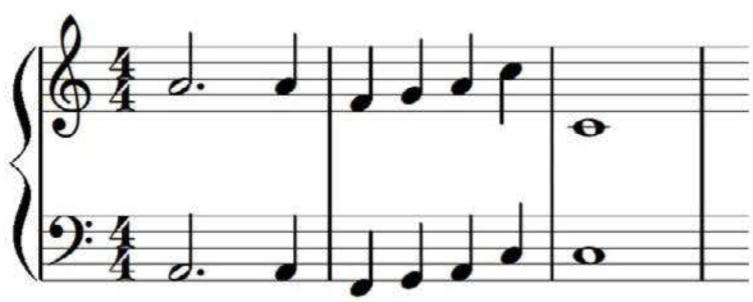
Dots and ties examples

A more in-depth look at duration, dots and ties



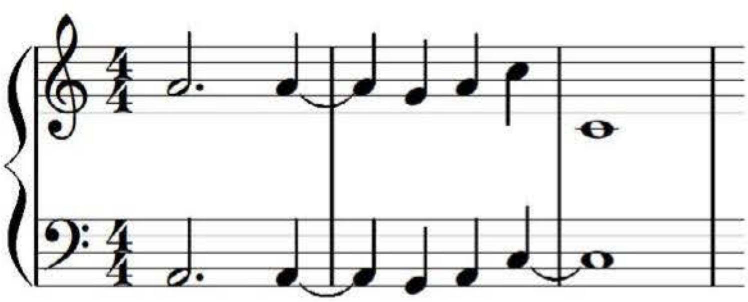
01 Remember note duration

First is a semibreve/whole note. Two minims/half notes make a semibreve/whole note, so two crotchets/quarter notes make a minim/half note. Notes smaller than crotchets/quarter notes have flags, and each flag halves the value.



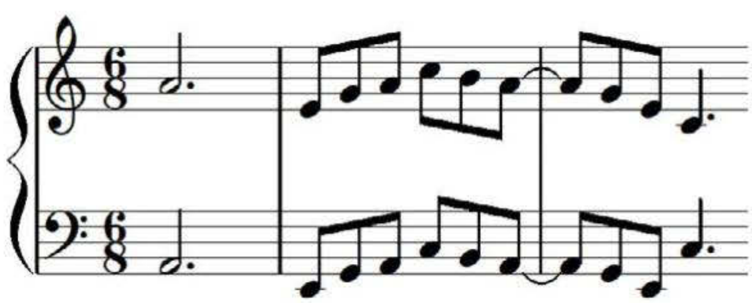
02 Dotted notes

Here is a dotted minim/half note, which lasts three beats, as the dot extends a minim's value by half. Another crotchet/quarter note is added in to complete the bar's four beats for the 4/4 time signature.



03 Tied notes

You can see how the tie joins the two notes over a bar. You play tied notes as one long note instead of separately. This example features two crotchets/quarter notes tied together – this enables notes to carry on across bars.



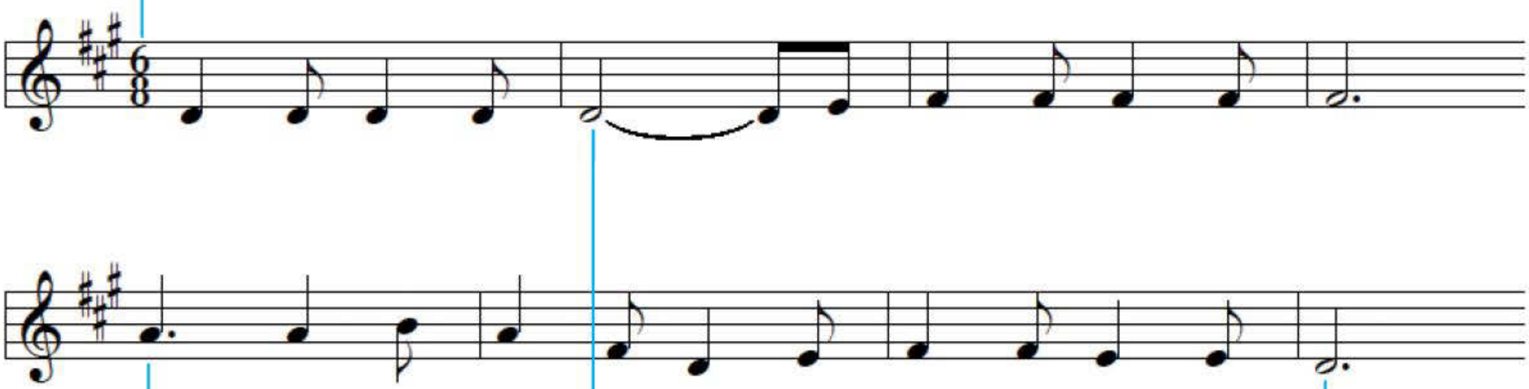
04 Different time signatures

This example shows dots and ties in 4/4 and 6/8 time signatures. Notice how the dots and ties extend a note's length and then the note durations add up in the bars according to the specific signature.

Dots and ties in action

Discover how these little music markings make a difference

6/8 time
In this example of a popular nursery rhyme, a 6/8 time signature is used. This means that there are six beats of quavers/eighth notes per bar



Dotted crotchet/quarter note
The dot on this crotchet/quarter note extends the note's duration by half, meaning that it is now extended by a further beat in 6/8 time

Tied up
This minim/half note is tied up to a quaver/eighth note, making this D last a total of five beats in compound time, or 2.5 beats in simple time

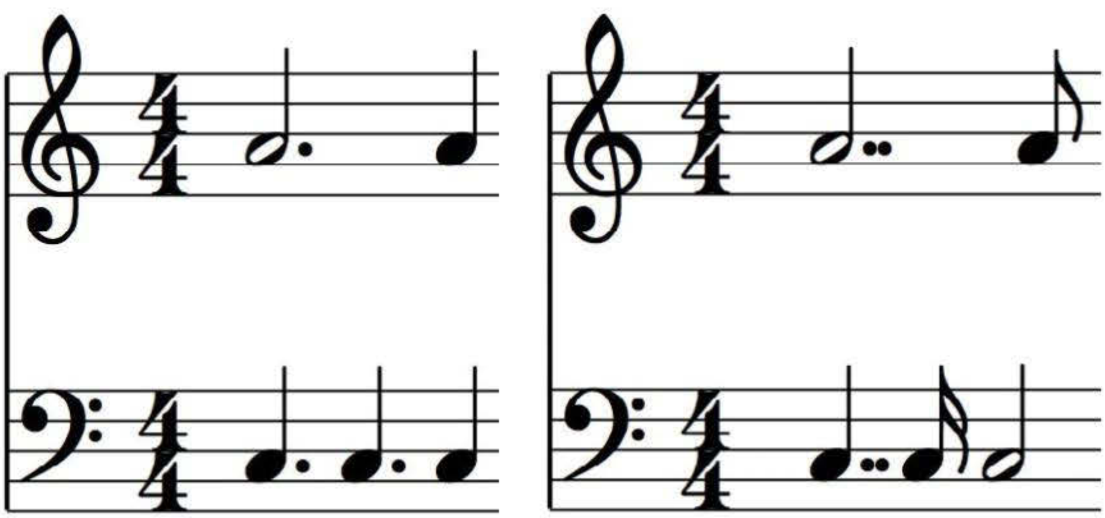
Dotted minim/half note
This is probably the most common dotted note, as it lasts for three beats in simple time. In 6/8 time such as this piece, it takes up the whole bar

Top tip
All tied up
As well as the duration of notes, ties can also be used to carry over accidentals. These are symbols that appear next to notes that tell the reader to play a note sharp, flat or natural. See the next page for more.

Double-dotted notes

Adding extra dots means extra time

Once you understand dotted notes, double-dotted notes are easy. The second dot simply extends the note by a further half of the first dot. If a minim/half note is worth two beats, then a dotted minim/half note would be extended to three beats; a double-dotted minim/half note would be worth three and a half beats. Look at our examples to see how different note durations could fit into bars of 4/4 time. Triple-dotted notes are also used in notation, which makes a note 1 7/8 of its duration. You probably won't come across it too much!



Alter a note's pitch with accidentals

Learn what these quirky symbols mean and whip your sharps and flats into shape
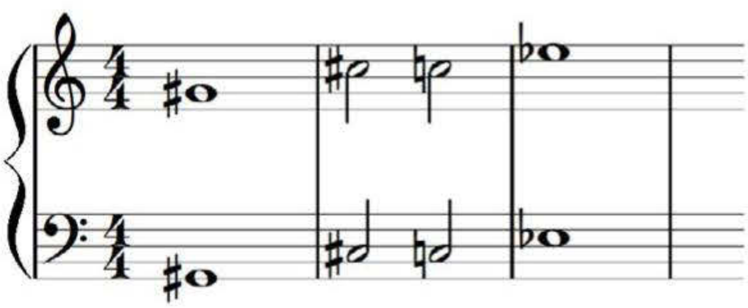
The term 'accidentals' is given to little symbols that turn a note into a sharp or flat, or back to a natural. Essentially, the symbols tell you how to modify the pitch of the note. Flat lowers the pitch by one half step/semitone and sharp raises the pitch by a half step/semitone. You'll see these symbols to the left of note in question, and you will also notice them clinging on to the treble and bass staves between the clef and the time signature. This is what is known as the key signature.

Key signatures tell musicians which key the tune is played in, and refer to the sharps and flats that are to be used throughout the piece – you'll need to memorise the ones to play from the signature. If you've learnt the different scales, you will be able to recognise key signatures much faster. For example, if the music tells you that the key is G major, you will know to use all of the notes from the scale of G major, including F sharp. All key signatures except for C major/A minor have sharps and flats in them. The signature itself will have the little sharp or flat signs on the corresponding line of the stave for that note.

Another accidental is the natural. When this is next to a note it cancels out the sharp or the flat instructed by the key signature or prior accidentals, so you should play the natural note, ie the white key.
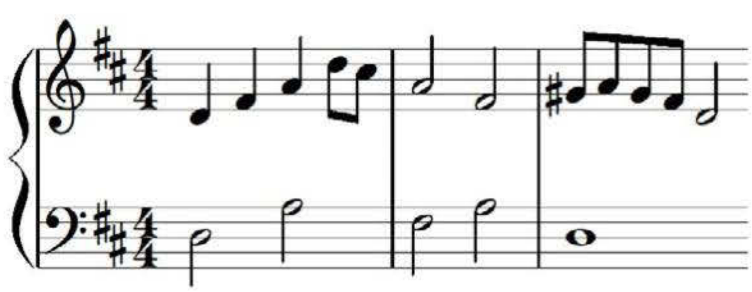
Sharps, flats and naturals

Master using accidentals in just a few very simple steps
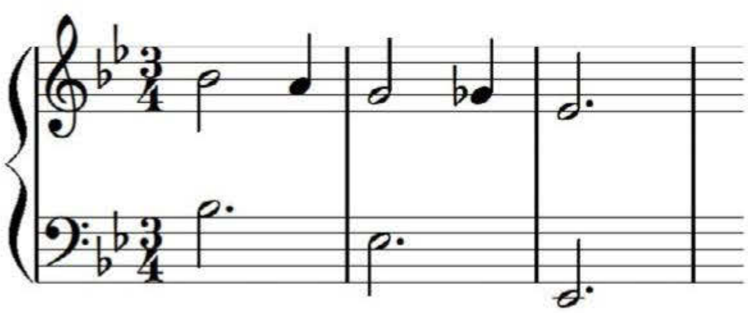


01 Simple symbols

Here are the basic symbols for sharp, which looks like a hash symbol (#), flat, which looks like a 'b', and natural, which looks like a box with a stick at alternate corners. These appear next to notes and in key signatures.
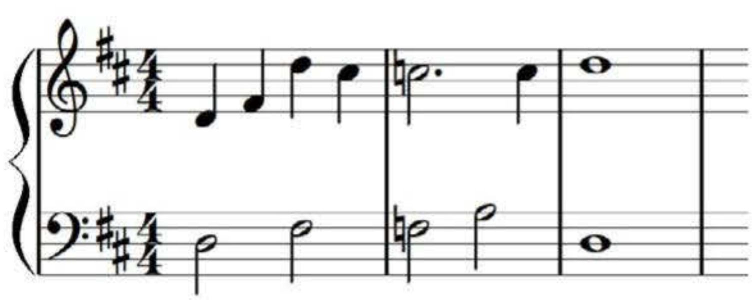


02 Key it in

Notice the key signature next to the clefs. The symbols are on the F and C lines to tell you that these notes are sharps. G sharp is not in the key signature, so an accidental must be used if you want to notate it.



03 Playing with flats

In this example the symbols are on the B line and the E space on both clefs, instructing you to play a B flat and an E flat every time you see a B or an E in the music. G flat is not in the key signature, so an accidental must be used.



04 Natural symbols

Here, F and C are played as sharps. However when you see the natural symbol, you play the white key. You should play C natural for the duration of the bar, so there are two C naturals in the second bar, even though there's only one symbol.
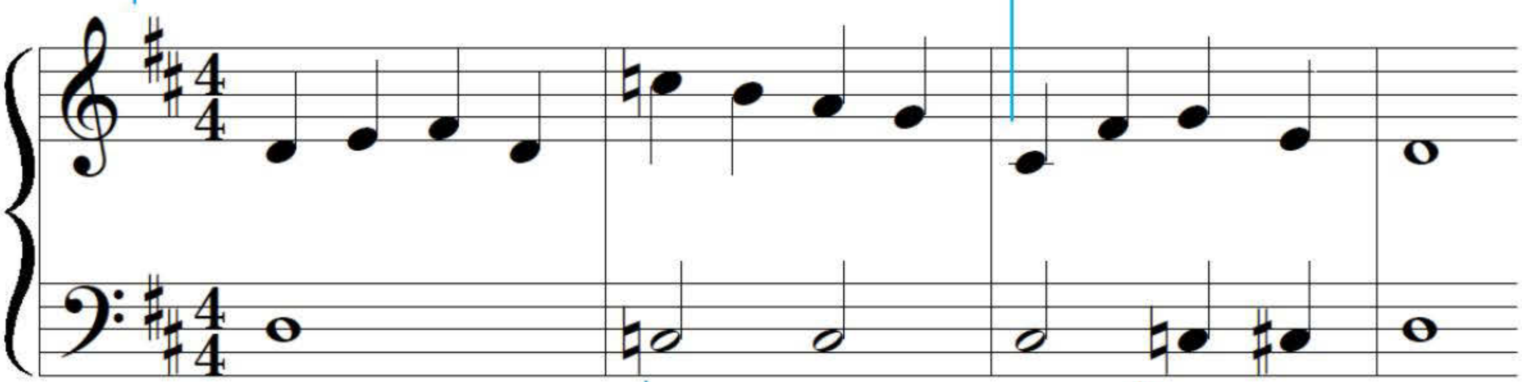
Accidentals in action

See accidentals on the page as they help the music come alive

Top tip
Enharmonic equivalents
On a piano, look at the black key between C and D. This is C#, as it's a half step above C. But it's also a half step below D, so it can also be called Db. This is an enharmonic equivalent.

D major/B minor
Here you can see the key signature of D major/B minor. It tells you to play two sharps throughout the music, which are F# and C#

Back to sharps
Although we had a C natural in the previous bar, since the bar has finished we're back to obeying the key signature. This note is C sharp



C naturals
These notes would be C sharps, but the natural sign means you must play C naturals. Unless dictated otherwise, the rest of the Cs in the bar – such as the following note – are naturals. This resets after the bar line, though

A tricky bar
The first note here is a C sharp, as a bar has passed since the C natural before it. However, the second note is C natural as it a carries a natural accidental. If the next note had no accidental it would be C natural, but the sharp sign means it's C sharp

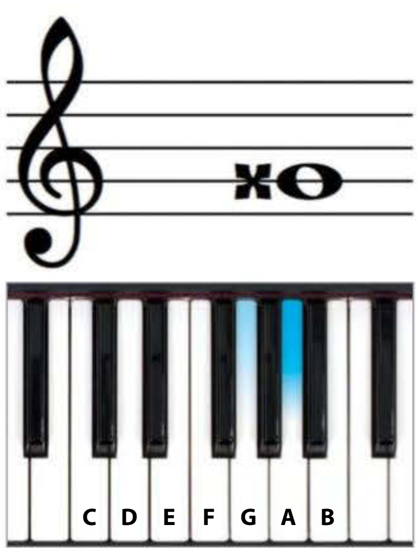
Doubling up

What do you get when you double your sharps and flats?

A double flat is signified by using two flat symbols ('bb'), and the double sharp symbol looks like an x. Whereas a flat or sharp alters a note's pitch by one half-step/semitone, you'll find that a double flat or double sharp alters the note by a full step/tone. In our examples, Gbb is the same as F natural because it's two semitones (a tone) lower, while Gx is the same as A natural as it's two semitones higher.

"A double flat or double sharp alters the note by a full step (two half steps)"





Navigate music notation

Time to get score savvy and stay on track through notation with repeats and endings

Learning to read music is like learning a different language. There are so many different directions, most of them in Italian, and it can get confusing when you're faced with a page of music peppered with markings and symbols. It can get especially sticky when certain tunes require you to double-back on yourself and repeat sections over and over. Where do you start from and how do you know what to repeat? The good news for beginners is that once you understand the theory behind all this melodious jiggery-pokery, you'll realise that all it takes is the memorising of a few key attributes to keep you flowing through the bars.
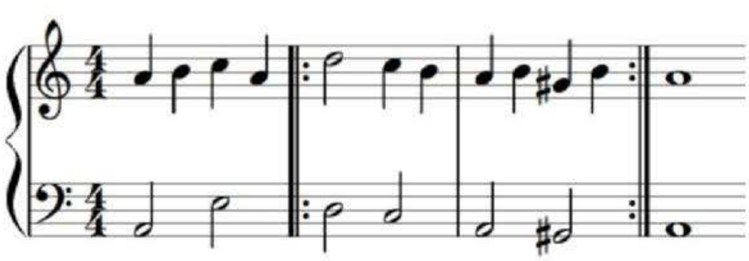
The first aspect to grasp is bar lines and what different ones mean. Then codas and segno signs step in. These symbols, alongside some Italian directions that we will cover in more detail soon, will give you a clear idea of what notes and bars to repeat and when.

The last things that you'll need to recognise when navigating your way around a piece of sheet music are first and second time lines. These bars show you when there are alternate endings to a tune or part of a tune. In time and with a bit of practice, you'll know exactly what you need to play and where.

It's best to think about these symbols as more like road signs on a stave. They'll point you in the right direction and then you'll be playing beautifully in no time.
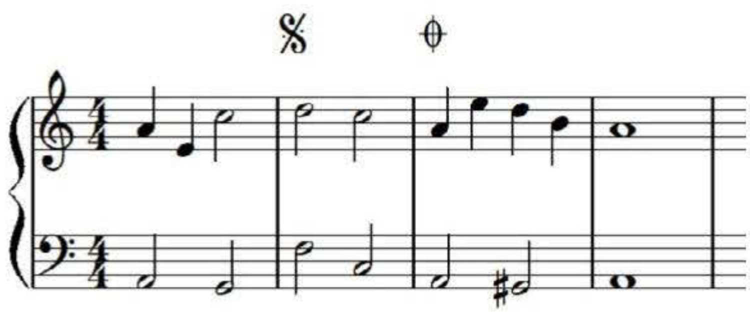
Repeats and endings

Get to grips with the bare essentials of what to play, when and where
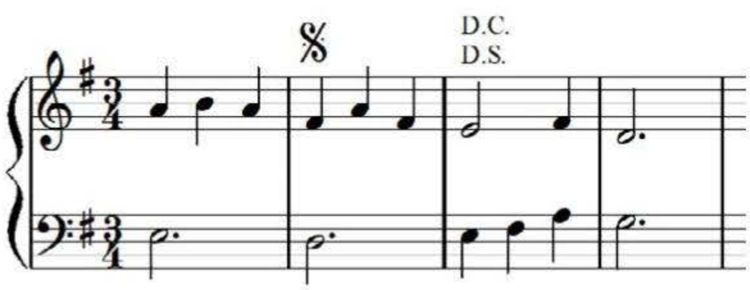


01 Repeat bar lines

These types of bar line instruct you to repeat parts of the music. Start-repeat bars have dots on the right and end-repeat have dots on the left. Play bars 1–3, repeat bars 2-3, then simply carry on.
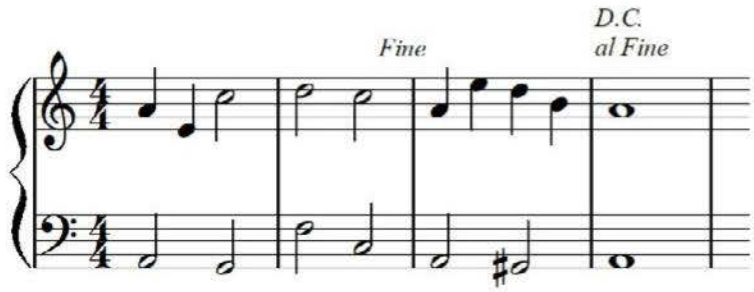


02 Coda and segno

These symbols are markers, used alongside Italian terms to show you where in the music to play from or jump to. The coda symbol looks like a cross through a circle and the segno symbol looks like a crossed S with two dots.



03 DS and DC

Complementing the symbols are the Italian phrasings dal segno (DS) which means 'from the sign' (which is the Segno symbol), and da capo (DC) which means 'from the beginning'. These can be accompanied by other phrases.



04 Further instructions
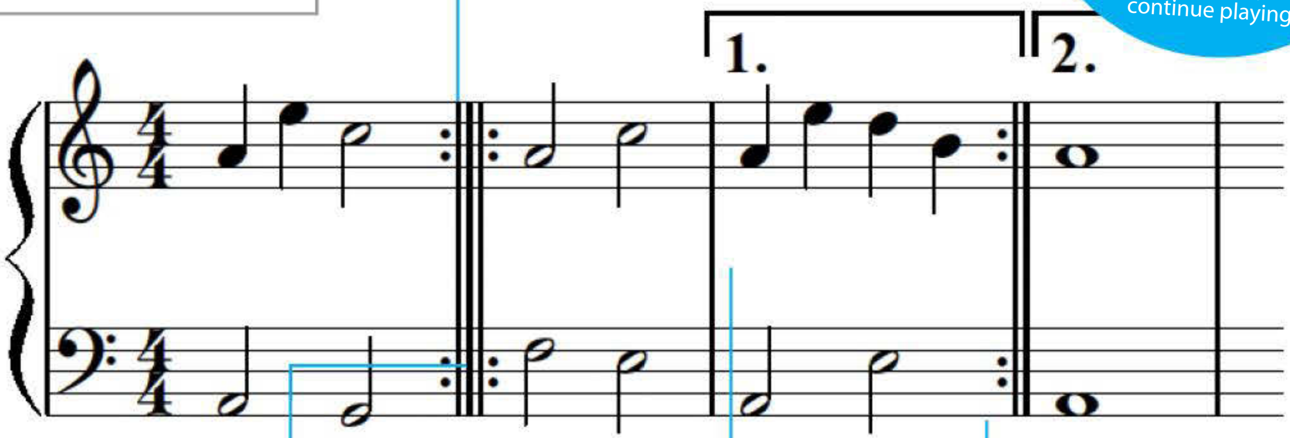
D.C. al Fine means you should go back to the start until you reach the word 'Fine' (pronouned feen-ay). Once you get to Fine the piece will then end. If the D.C. al Fine instruction is not accompanied by Fine then just play until the end.

Skipping about the stave

The key elements to recognise for musical repeats

> **Top tip**
> **Keeping it simple**
> The Italian abbreviations are simpler to use than English, eg the phrase 'DC al coda' essentially means 'repeat from the beginning, until you reach a coda symbol (or phrase al coda) then jump forward to the next coda symbol to continue playing'.

Repeat bars
When you see this style of bar line, repeat all of the music either from the beginning or that you can see sandwiched between the two start- and end-repeat bars



Double repeat bars
This is simply a start-repeat and end-repeat bar sitting back-to-back on the stave. It signifies the end of one repeat phrase but also the beginning of another
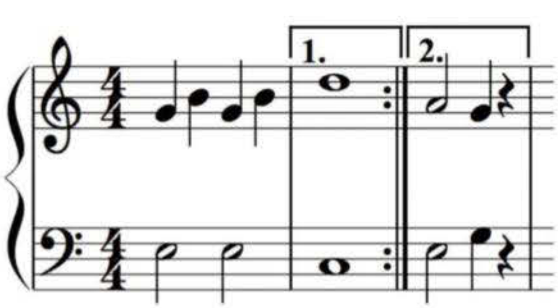
Time bars
These first and second time bar lines indicate alternate endings. When you see these, you play the music as normal and then play the notes under the first time bar
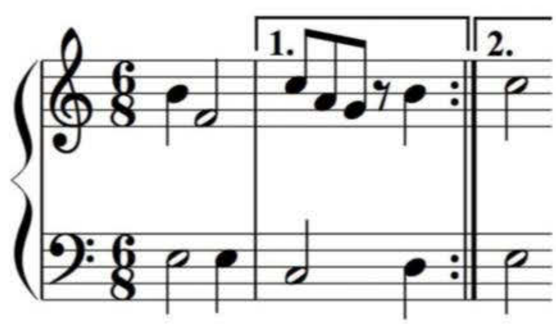
Alternate endings
See the repeat bar? Once you've played the notes under the first time bar, you play the repeated phrases, skip the first time bar and finish with the second time bar

Time bars

Playing musical repetition and alternate endings is easy

Another form of repetition comes in the form of first and second time bars. These are numbered brackets that appear above the notes and change the ending of a repeated passage. The first time the passage is played you play the notation under the first time bar. Then when the passage is repeated, you skip the notes in the first time bar and only play the notes in the second time bar. They don't just come in 1. and 2. form either. For example, you would use 1. 2. 3. and 4. to play something through four times yet only use a different ending the fourth time.





> "First and second time bars change the ending of a repeated passage"

Control the volume with dynamics

Inject more personality into your music by learning to read and play using dynamics

When you start to read music, all those dots and symbols on the page can look confusing. But as you get more confident, you can then start to put more 'oomph' into your music when you come across dynamics.

Essentially, musical dynamics control the volume of a piece. They are Italian words that are abbreviated or symbolised alongside the notes on the stave and are just one way that the composer is telling you to inject more feeling and personality into a song, rather than just routinely playing the notes off a page.
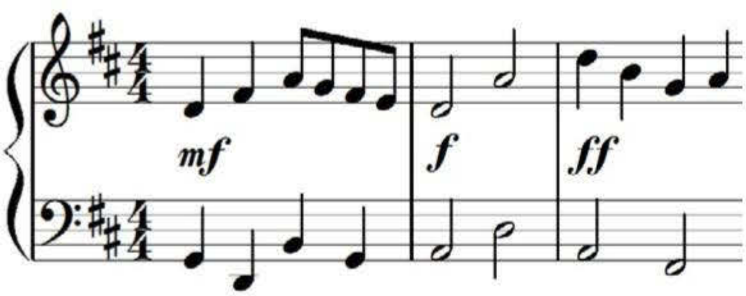
The basic dynamics are forte (f) and piano (p). These mean loud and quiet respectively. However there are plenty more variations, for example pianissimo (pp) means very quiet and fortissimo (ff) means very loud. The word 'mezzo' is often added on to these, which means moderate, so mezzo-forte (mf) means moderately loud.

Symbols are also used. A crescendo is symbolised with a < and means 'getting louder'. Similarly, a diminuendo (>) means getting quieter. Check out our table of the most common musical dynamics to learn.

As musical instruments have a limit to just how loud or quiet they can sound, you don't want to play your loudest when seeing a forte symbol, only to turn the page and realise that the piece escalates to fortissimo and you cannot play any louder.
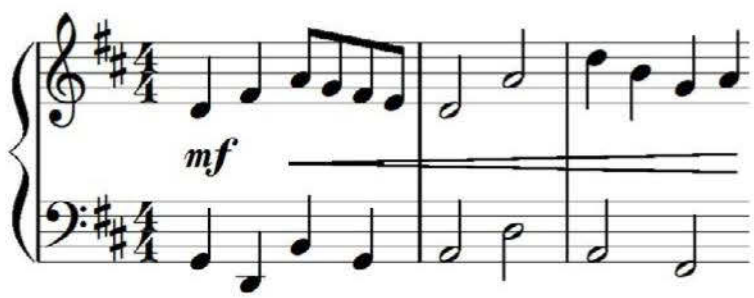
Master dynamics

Get to grips with dynamics for soft, soothing melodies or clanging compositions
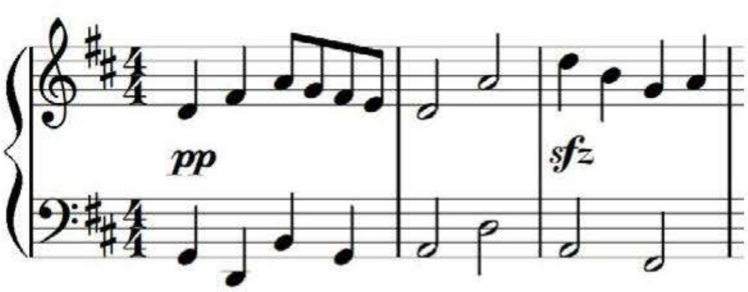


01 Static instructions

For directions such as piano (p) and forte (f), all notes should be played at that volume until further instruction. Here, the instructions get louder each bar, from mezzo forte (mf), to forte (f) and then fortissimo (ff).



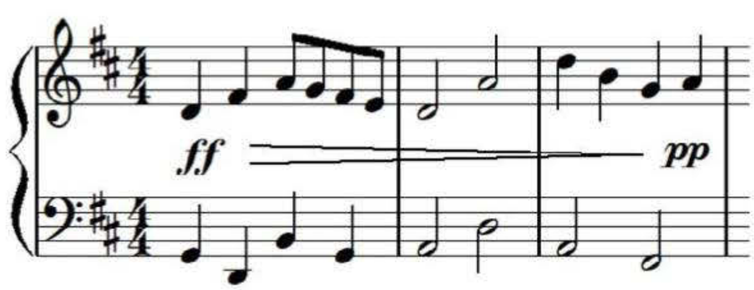
02 Dynamic transitions

Instructions such as crescendo and diminuendo mean that the music should gradually begin to change. The example above is a more gradual example than in Step 1. The right hand should get louder as the piece goes on.



03 All change

Quick changes in volume are marked with instructions like sforzando (sfz), which is used for a sudden burst with an accent. In this example, the first notes are played softly (pianissimo) and the sforzando note bursts out at the end.



04 It's all relative
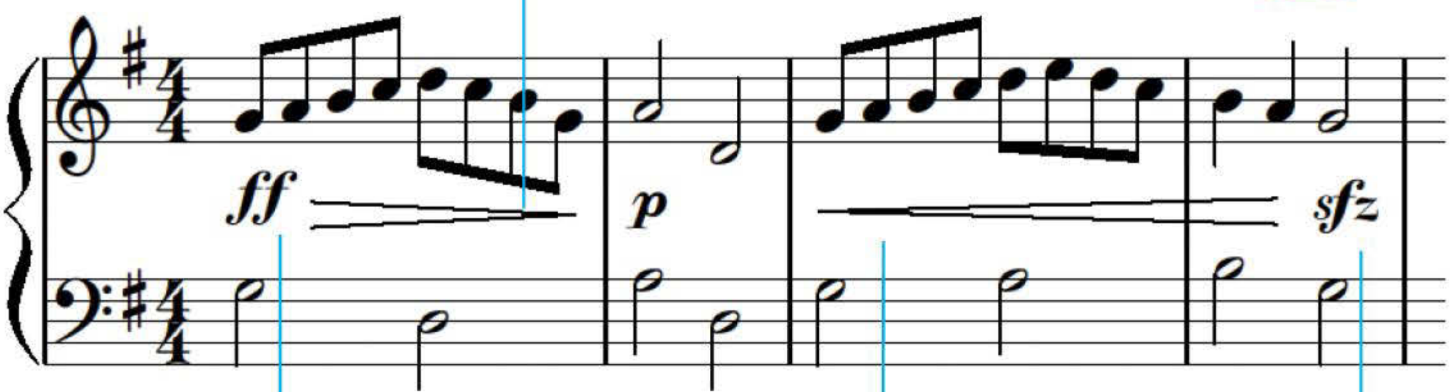
You need to interpret the dynamics of the music and look at the piece's context, mood and style to gauge how loudly or softly you play. Remember it's about volume and not to be confused with 'articulation', which deals with expression.

A dynamic sound

Take a look at musical dynamics doing what they do best

Top tip
Where on the stave?
On musical scores for instrumental parts, you will see all of the Italian dynamics symbols placed below the staves. However if you look at the score for a vocal part you'll notice that the dynamics are noted above the stave.

Diminuendo
The diminuendo (>) instructs the musician to play the notes gradually quieter until another instruction is given. Along with a crescendo, these symbols are sometimes referred to as 'hairpins'



Fortissimo
This piece needs to be played very loudly to start, thanks to the fortissimo (ff) direction. However, this is followed by a diminuendo transition, so it should get quieter

Crescendo
These diverging lines denote a crescendo, so the piece needs to get louder until the lines stop. You may also see a crescendo direction written as 'cresc.'

Sforzando
After the crescendo builds the volume, it ends with a sudden burst of loudness as instructed by this sforzando mark

Different types of dynamics

There are plenty more dynamic directions to get your head around

We have covered the most basic and widely used dynamic instructions but there are plenty of other ones that you'll come across. Some of these are real tongue-twisters. If you see pppppp on the stave, this means pianissisissisissimo, or 'as softly as possible'. There are also combined markings such as pianoforte (pf) which means 'soft and then immediately loud', or mezzoforte (mfp) meaning 'start moderately loudly then instantly drop to a softer volume'. There are also symbols that will affect dynamics, such as accents, and sometimes the dynamic direction will just be written out in plain English.

Symbol	Name	Description
<	Crescendo	Getting louder
>	Diminuendo	Getting quieter
ppp	Pianississimo	Extremely quiet
pp	Pianissimo	Very quiet
p	Piano	Quiet
f	Forte	Loud
ff	Fortissimo	Very loud
fff	Fortississimo	Extremely loud
mf	Mezzo forte	Medium loud
mp	Mezzo piano	Medium quiet
fz	Forzando	Begin note loudly with strong accent
sfz	Sforzando	Loud and accented

Set and change the tempo

Ensure your jigs are jolly and your ballads are slow and beautiful by learning the essentials of musical tempo

Another aspect of music that helps bring the notes to life is tempo. The word comes from the Latin word 'tempus' meaning 'time', and indicates to the musician how fast or slow the music should be played. It can also direct the mood or feel.

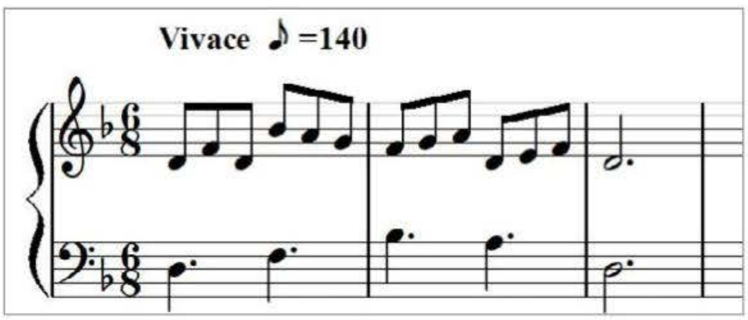
You'll see the tempo marked at the top of the first stave, and it's effective throughout the piece unless the composer states otherwise.

There are two ways that tempo can be expressed. The first is in beats per minute (or BPM). This is a rather precise measurement, and you can use a metronome to help you keep in perfect time. As a time signature tells you the number of beats in each bar, the tempo tells you the speed at which to play these beats. At the top of the stave, you will see a particular type of note (eg a crotchet/quarter note) with the BPM value next to it. This means that the crotchet/quarter note is specified as the beat, and the number (eg 120) is the number of beats that must be played per minute.

The other way of directing tempo is by a series of Italian phrases which are much more interpretive. Just like the Italian phrases that deal with a music's dynamics, you will come across many phrases that indicate the pace or mood for the music. Check out the table below-right for the most common terms.

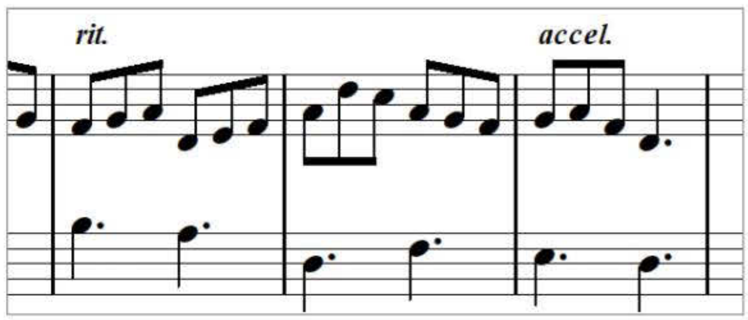
Speed it up or slow it down

Some key tempo phrases and symbols that you should know
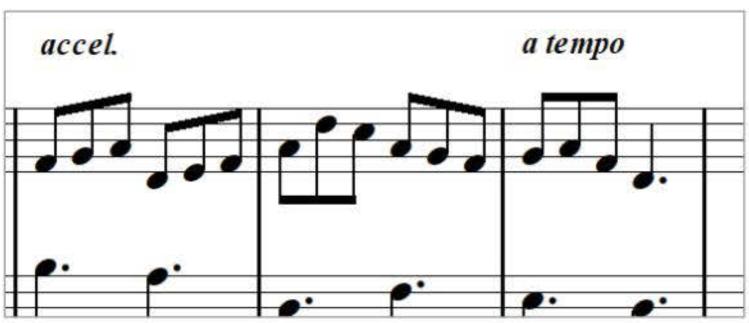


01 Beats per minute

To determine which type of note signifies one beat, you can generally look at the bottom number of the time signature. Here, in 6/8 time signature, one quaver/eighth note equals one beat, so there needs to be 140 of these a minute.



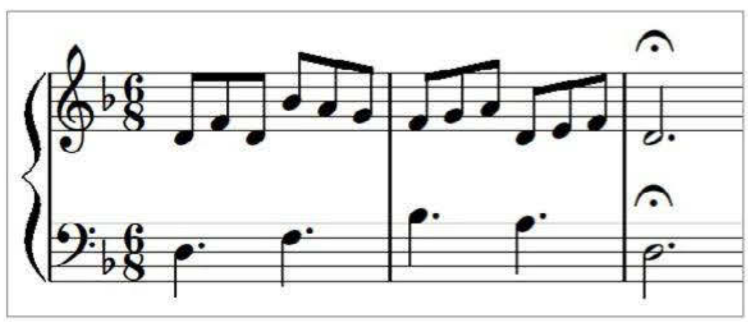
02 Written directions

Here you can see the directions 'rit.' and 'accel.' which are abbreviations of the Italian words ritardando (getting slower) and accelerando (getting faster). These give an approximate flavour of the intended speed at which to play.



03 Back to the start

As well as instructions, there are also tempo phrases to direct you. In this example you can see the words 'a tempo'. This means that from that point you should continue to play the music at the original speed.



04 Tempo symbols

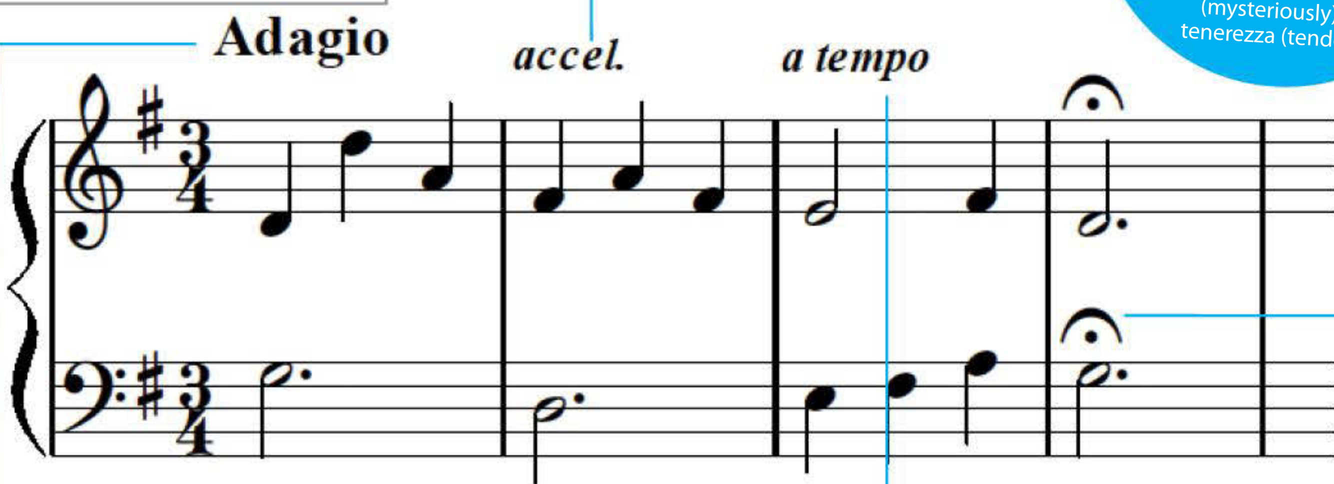
There are some symbols that are tempo directions. This eye-like example is a fermata. It appears above a particular note and instructs the player to hold the note for as long as the interpretations of the musician or conductor allows.

Keep the beat

A snippet of tempo directions doing what they do best

Top tip
Set the mood
As well as general directions, there are plenty of Italian terms that indicate both the mood and the tempo of a musical arrangement. Some good examples are appassionato (passionately), misterioso (mysteriously) or tenerezza (tenderly).

Accelerando
In our example, you should get faster throughout bar 2; however, you're likely to see this instruction for several more bars



Define the style
You can also gain a very good idea of the composer's intention for the style or mood of the piece simply by looking at the tempo directions

Back to normal
An accelerando or ritardando instruction will often be accompanied by an 'a tempo' one. This means to return the original tempo of the piece

Fermata
There are symbols that can dictate tempo. Here the power is in the player's hands with a fermata, so these notes can be extended for as long as desired
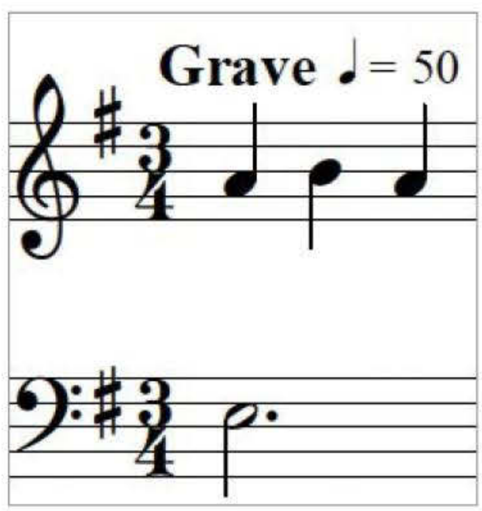
Common tempo directions

Learn these and set yourself up for the future

In addition to some of the more flamboyant Italian tempo directions, there are a select few that you will come across time and time again. Concentrate on these to begin with, and you will be off to a good start. There are also phrases that can link tempo instructions together, for example molto means 'very', so you may spot molto vivace which means very lively. You may also come across moderato, which as you may guess means 'moderately', for example moderato vivace.

"There are phrases that can link tempo instructions together"

Word	Meaning
Adagio	Leisurely
Allegro	Fast and lively
Andante	Moderate, walking pace
Grave	The slowest pace
Lento	Slow
Poco a poco	Gradually
Presto	Very fast
Sostenuto	Sustained



Add articulations to notes

Play notes with character and style by familiarising yourself with articulations

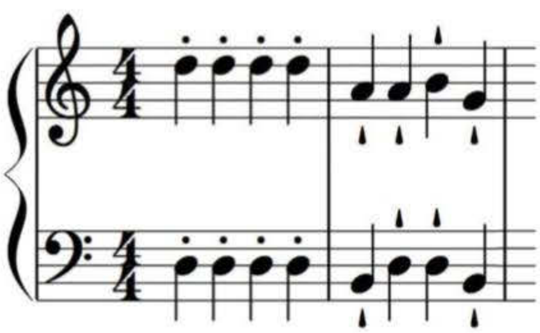
When you're reading music, alongside being given general direction for the whole piece and technical instructions on what notes to play at what time, you will also come across markings which tell you how to play individual notes in terms of style. No matter what it is, you still need to know what kind of emphasis to put on it. This is where articulations come in.

These small symbols are found either above or below an individual note, depending on the position on the stave. Articulations can alter the way you play each note as well as create relationships between the notes themselves.

Instructions such as staccato (shown by a small dot, but be careful not to confuse this with a 'dotted note') can tell you to play the notes in a detached and 'clipped' manner. Conversely, when you see the markings for legato (lines which tie notes of different pitches together – but different to 'ties' which connect notes of the same pitch) you know to slur the notes, with no audible spaces. Some symbols direct you to add accents to a note, and there are some articulations (such as sforzando, or 'sfz') that deal with volume and are considered as dynamics. There are also articulations that cross the border into tempo territory, such as a fermata.

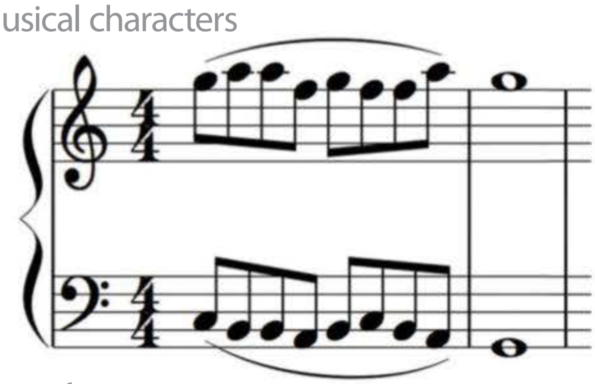
Time to articulate

Play each note perfectly as you master the use of these musical characters
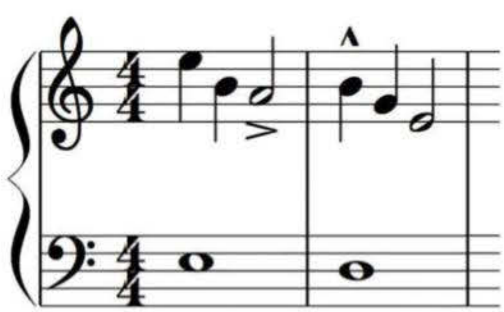


01 Staccato

A dot beneath (or directly above) a note instructs you to play it staccato, which means in a detached manner. This is then taken further with stacatissimo, which is symbolised by a small triangle beneath (or above) the note.
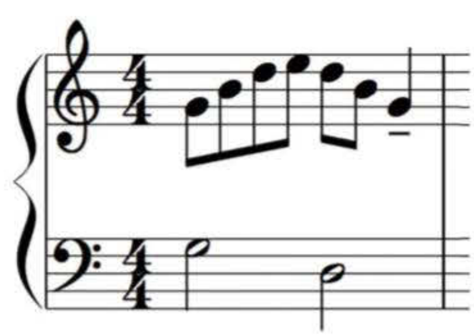


02 Legato

Here the notes are all joined with a curved line. This signifies legato, or 'slurring'. When you see notes written like this, play the notes together in a long, lazy drag, with no gaps between notes until the end of the slur.



03 Accents

When you spot these little guys, they're telling you to put some extra force on that one note. A normal accent (bar 1) has the triangle pointing right, but for a stronger accent (bar 2), you'll see it reaching upwards. .



04 Tenuto

A simple line above or below the note instructs you to play the note for its full length. The note is to be separated from surrounding notes, which could mean that it's emphasised or played louder.

Use musical ornaments

Learn about these extra pieces of musical goodness used to decorate a tune
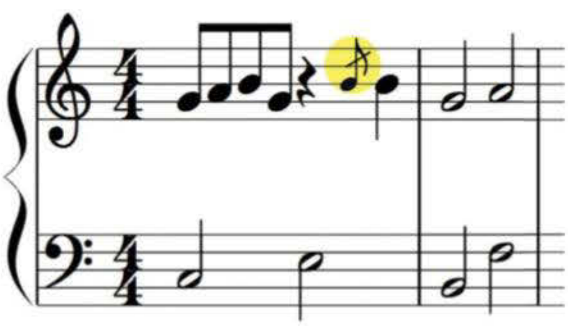
In the same way that dynamics, tempo and articulations all layer up to create marvellous music, ornaments simply add to this with little quirks and fiddly bits that enhance the tune. They're easy to recognise and you might find that the hardest part is getting your fingers around them on the piano keys!

Ornaments are noted as small symbols above specific notes. There are four kinds that you need to know. Start with a trill, which is really simple – play the note and the note above it alternately in quick succession. Next is a turn, which is also easy. It's four notes: the note above, the main note, the note below and the main note again. Then there's a mordent, which has three notes. There are two kinds of mordent – upper and lower. For upper mordents you play the main note, then the note above it, then the main note once more. Lower notes have the same principle; you play the note below the main note in the middle. The last ones are grace notes. These are single-note ornaments that appear on the stave as 'mini notes' next to a main note. There are two categories: acciaccatura and appoggiatura.

All ornaments must be played to the duration of the note they're assigned to. For example, a trill on a quaver/eighth note must last no longer than the quaver/eighth note's beat.
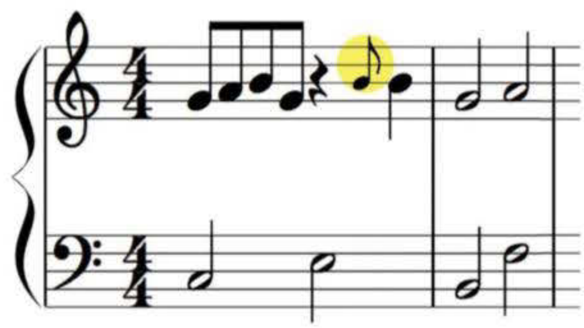
Beautify the notes

Know your symbols to create intricate and flamboyant melodies



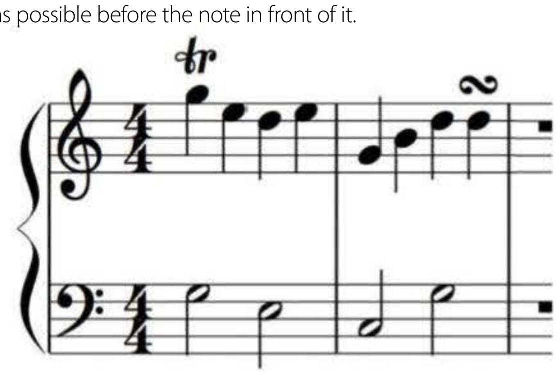
01 Acciaccatura

This type of grace note is symbolised by a mini quaver/eighth note with a slash through the tail. It is sometimes referred to as a 'crushed note' as it is played as quickly as possible before the note in front of it.



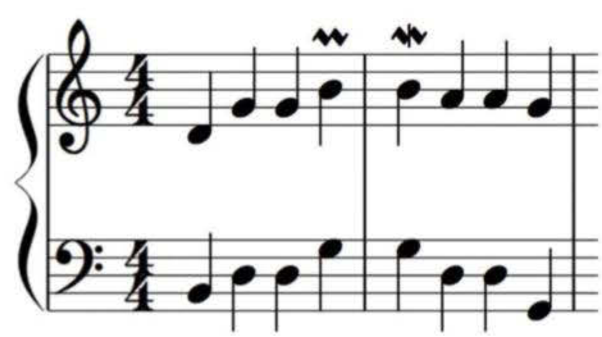
02 Appoggiatura

These grace-note ornaments are similar to acciaccaturas, however they fall on the beat of the note, not before it. An appoggiatura can consist of one or more notes and their symbol is the same but without a slash.



03 Trills and turns

To play a trill (left), alternate quickly between the main note and a whole or half-step above. To play a turn, quickly play the note above, then the main note, then the note below and then the main note again.



04 Mordents

These are upper (bar 1) and lower (bar 2) mordents. An upper mordent consists of two main notes sandwiched around a note that's a whole step lower. A lower mordent is the same, but with a note higher in the middle.


CRAMER
LONDON

Playing the piano

With your new knowledge of music theory, you can now master the building blocks of piano music: chords, scales and arpeggios



"Start playing the notes very slowly and smoothly. Once you have done a few slow repetitions, you can build up speed"

Warm up your hands

Limbering up before you practise and play is an essential part of learning piano

In the same way that an athlete must warm their body up before running a race, a pianist must warm up before they play music. Although not as physically taxing as running the 100m, going through a few short piano exercises before you begin is a sure way to enhance the way you play.

Relaxing your shoulders, arms, wrists and hands will enable you to flow through the music. Your finger dexterity will be improved, enabling you to both find and reach keys quickly and easily, putting no obstacle between you and the notes on the page. You'll also enjoy practising piano more too, because if you've warmed up properly you won't get achy fingers, wrists or back. Warming up also avoids getting cramp in your hands, which can be quite painful. If you've limbered up, and your physical posture is correct, you'll be able to comfortably play for as long as you like.

You can also use regular hand exercises to strengthen your fingers and even stretch your reach to enhance the notes you're able to play and the way you play them.
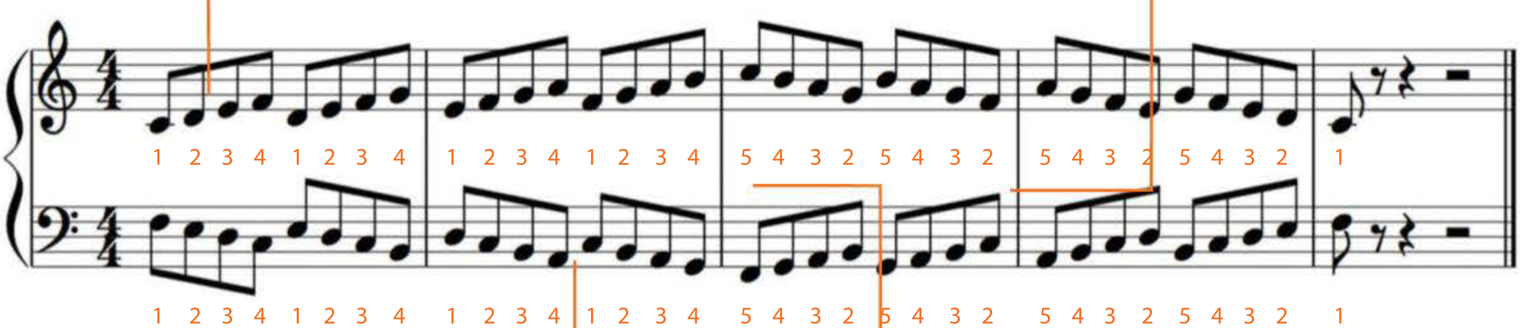
Physical tension can translate into music. If you're uncomfortable, your music might sound uncomfortable. It's important to prepare yourself properly before you develop any bad habits that can be difficult to combat. Here we'll show you some very simple exercises to start with, which you can then build upon for a top-notch warm-up repertoire to kick off your practice sessions and eventually your concerts with.

> "Relaxing your shoulders, arms wrists and hands will enable you to flow through the music"

Two-handed warm-up Get your hands ready before you start playing

Begin slowly
Start playing the notes very slowly and smoothly. Once you have done a few slow repetitions, you can build up speed as your hands begin to feel loose and relaxed

Step it up
Play a few repetitions with your right hand, then switch to your left hand and repeat. Then you can step up to playing with both hands as you build up speed and confidence



Even it out
Listen to yourself and be sure to play an even volume across all fingers. This exercise will help to strengthen your 4th and 5th fingers on each hand, which are usually the weakest

Breathe it out
It may seem obvious, but remember to keep breathing calmly and deeply as you exercise, practise and play to stay relaxed and comfortable at your piano

Top tip
Learn your finger patterns
To help you learn which fingers should hit which keys, you will often see the fingering written beneath notes. A 5 refers to your little finger, 4 to your ring finger, 3 to your middle finger, 2 to your index finger and 1 to your thumb.

Get set before you go
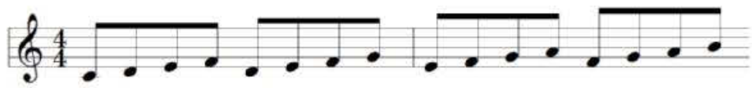
Pre-practice tips for budding pianists



01 Physical stretches

Gently stretch your arms and relax your shoulders. Move your hands and wrists in gentle circular motions clockwise and anti-clockwise, then press your hands together and tilt smoothly and gently towards and away from your body.





02 Right-hand workout

Your right hand is often the stronger of the two. Warm it up by playing simple keys up and down the keyboard, starting with your thumb (1) on Middle C. Start slow and then repeat to build up speed.





03 Left-hand exercises

Follow the notation, starting with your little finger (5). Then repeat the tune, but start on the next note higher than the previous starting note. Repeat this a few times to get your left hand ready to go.



04 Strengthening up

Complementary exercises can strengthen your fingers. Try holding down five keys at once, then as you hold them, play the note over and over again with your fourth finger. Then switch to your fifth. This will strengthen those fingers.

Introducing musical scales

Understand how scales are formed and how important they are

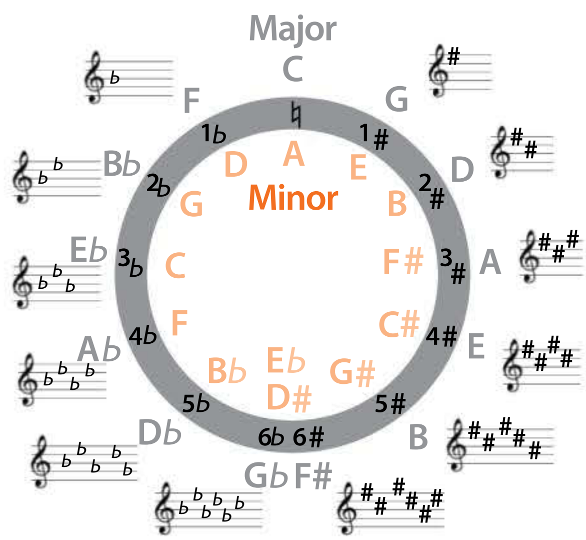
Scales in music are series of notes that are arranged into a specific sequence which can be either ascending or descending. They usually start and end on the same musically named note (ie C) separated by an octave (the distance between eight musical notes). The scales will normally follow a set pattern of either semitones (half steps) or tones (whole steps).

The three most common forms of scales are major, a happy-sounding scale; minor, a sad-sounding scale; and chromatic, a scale whose sound is ambiguous and is made up of semitones. There are, however, different types of minor scale with subtle differences in their make-up.

Learning scales on piano is important for a number of reasons. It will enable you to learn your keyboard quickly, which will become very important when performing music in various keys. They will also help to strengthen your fingers and increase their agility, which will improve your ability to be able to play tricky passages.

The circle of fifths

A visual and easy way of remembering the key of a scale is to use the circle of fifths. This circle shows the relationship between the 12 tones of the musical scale. To work out how many sharps (#) or flats (b) a key signature should have, follow the circle clockwise; major on the outside, minor on the inside. For example, if we look at A major, the key signature would have three sharps (these being F, C and G). The inside part of the circle shows us the relative minor (orange letters), and in this case it would be F# minor.

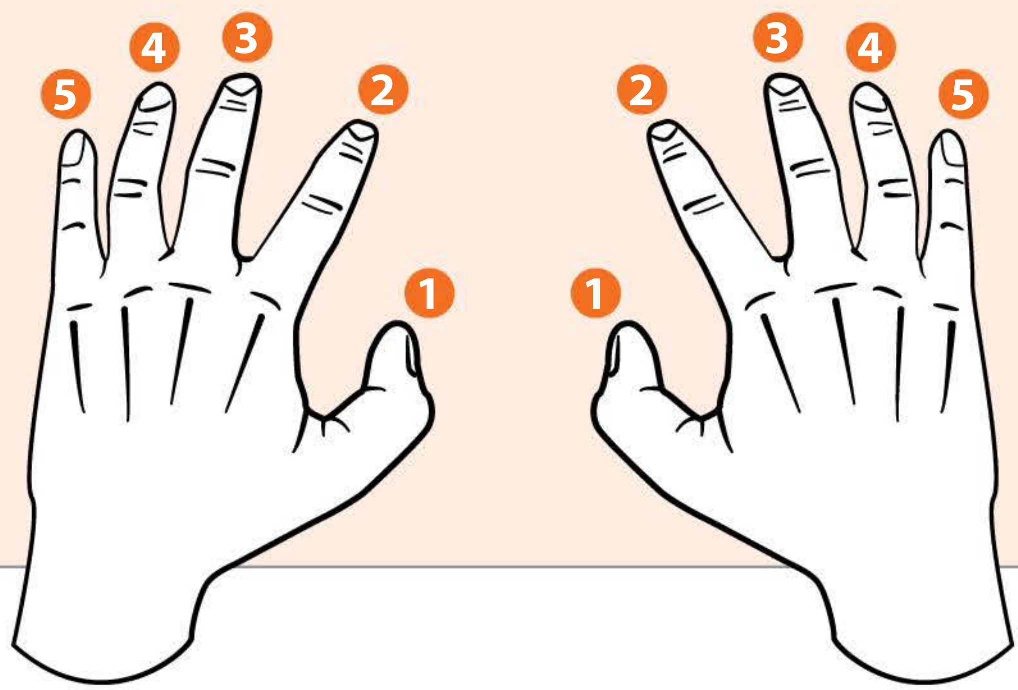


Your piano hands

Knowing which fingers play which notes is vital

When you're looking at the scales played in this book, you will notice tiny numbers next to the notes. These are the fingers with which you should play the notes. Playing scales using these finger patterns minimises effort and enables you to concentrate on building up speed.

> "Playing scales using these finger patterns minimises effort"



Learning the patterns

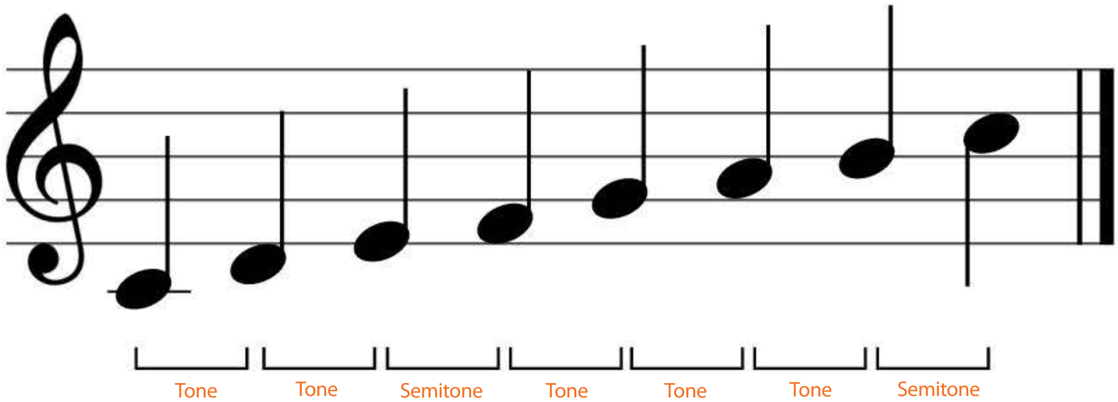
The theory behind some of the main types of scales

Scales are a great way to learn your way around a keyboard, but the way you play them will also help you build up speed and accuracy. Okay, so you can't argue that they are the most exciting things to play in the world, but thanks to their strict patterns you can play a scale on any key without even being able to read music! Their patterns relate to the distance between the notes in the scale and can be measured in semitones, which is the gap between each note on the keyboard. An interval of two semitones is known as a tone. So, the interval between C and C# is a semitone, but the interval between C and D is a tone.

But be warned; you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the distance between all white notes is a tone, though. In actual fact, the interval between B and C, as well as E and F is only a mere semitone because there are no black keys between them.

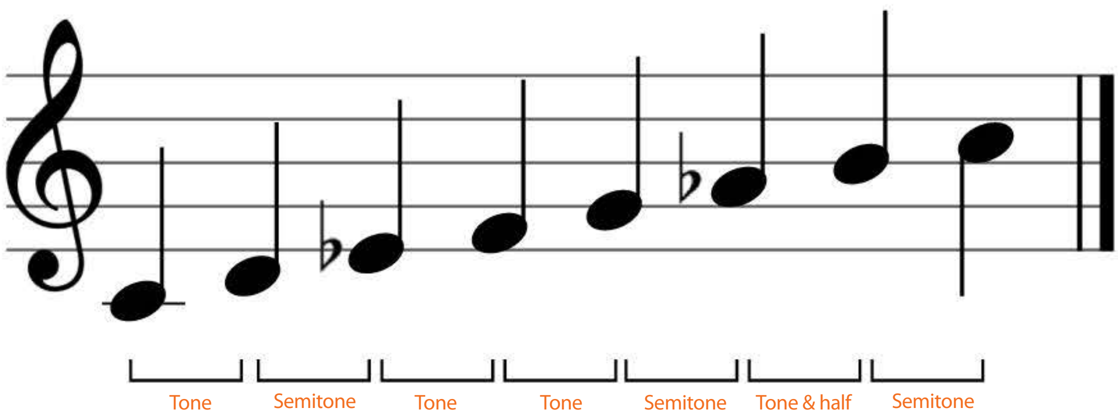
Major scale

The major scale's pattern goes like so: Tone, Tone, Semitone, Tone, Tone, Tone, Semitone. If we take the C major scale as an example, you can see that the two semitone intervals fall where there are adjacent white keys: between E and F, and between B and C. Any major scale you care to name uses this formula – as long as you know where the first note is you can easily work out the rest of the scale.



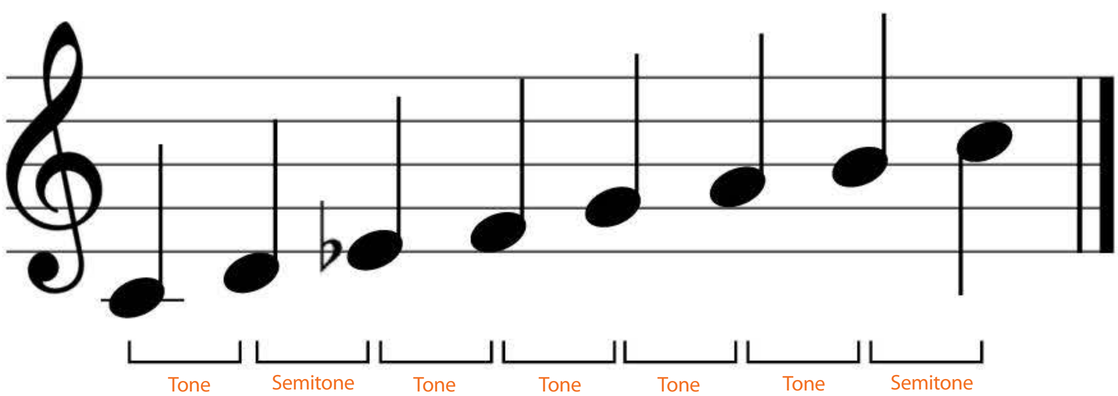
Harmonic minor scale

The harmonic minor scale is a little different, although it still uses a pattern – albeit one with a slight twist. The interval between the sixth and seventh notes is three semitones – a tone and a half. So, the pattern goes: Tone, Semitone, Tone, Tone, Semitone, Tone and a half, Semitone. Far from the happy sound of the major scale, it has a kind of spooky sound that distinguishes it from the other minor scales.



Melodic minor scale

The melodic minor is a strange one – it's almost like two different scales. Ascending the pattern is Tone, Semitone, Tone, Tone, Tone, Tone, Semitone, but descending it's Tone, Tone, Semitone, Tone, Tone, Semitone, Tone. The descending pattern is the same as a natural minor scale. It's a little tricky to remember two patterns on the same scale, but once you've learned it you'll soon be able to see the value in its flexibility.



Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

The C major scale

This is a great first step for beginners because it forms the foundation for learning scales

Scales are an important part of learning to play piano both in terms of understanding written music and for technical improvement. Reading musical notation is often referred to as music theory, which is like learning the language of music. Scales are a vital part of music theory, just as grammar is necessary for speaking. As you learn to play scales you will start to understand many aspects of musical theory.

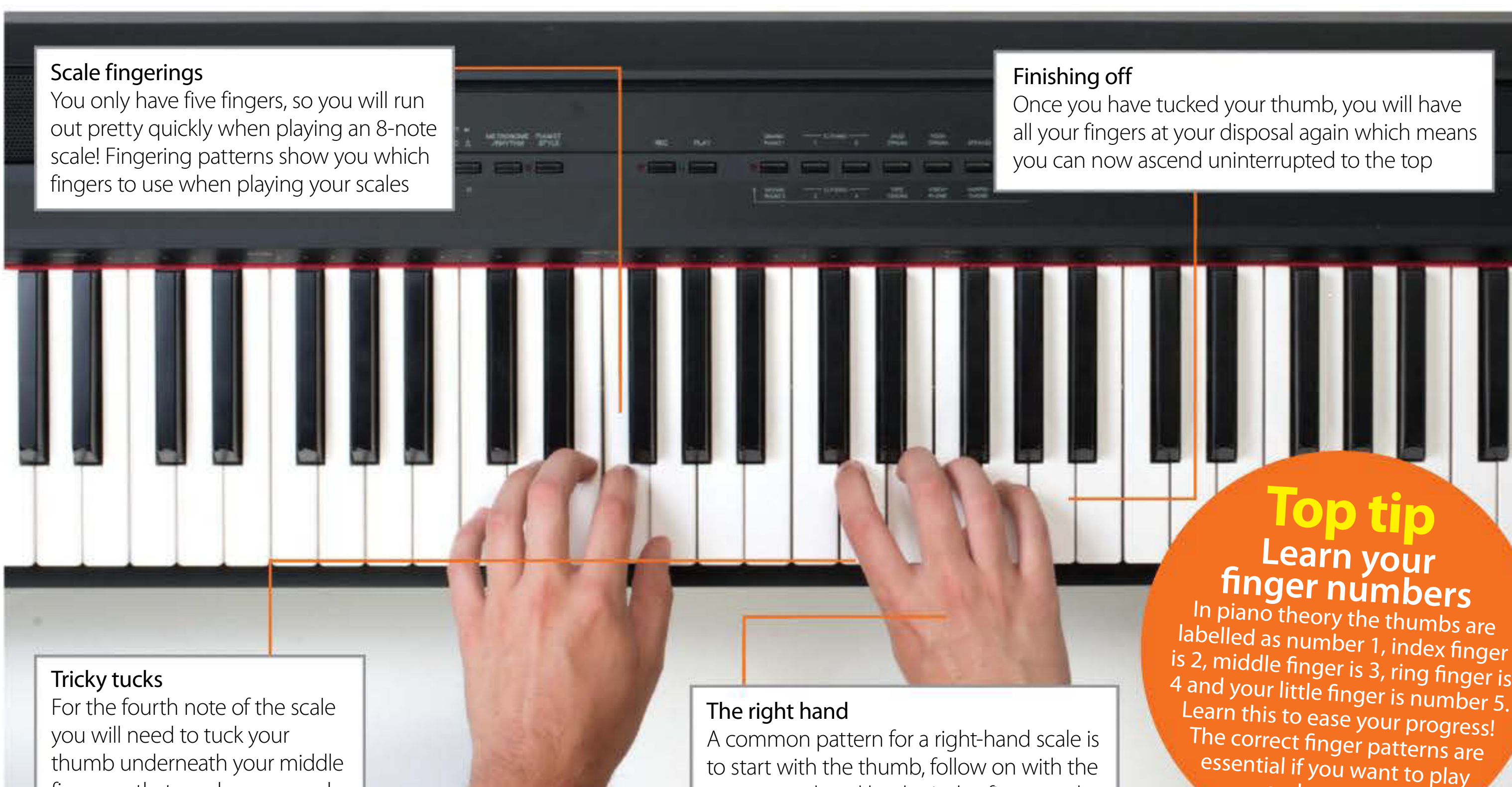
Practising scales regularly will improve the fluidity of your playing and help your fingers to become more adept to this new activity. Scales are great for developing co-ordination between the hands and are also ideal for introducing a variety of what pianists refer to as fingering patterns. Fingerings are marked as little numbers above the notes in piano music and are there to guide you as to which finger to use for the given note.

The C major scale is the perfect place to start as it contains only the white keys of the piano and forms the basis for all other scales. Major scales have a happy or cheerful sound, unlike minor scales which sound distinctly sad. The C major scale begins on the note C, ascends up the keyboard eight notes to the next C, then descends back down to the C you started on. As you will discover, all scales are essentially a pattern of notes that ascend the keyboard, then descend back down again.

> "Practising scales regularly will improve the fluidity of your playing and help your fingers become more adept"

Fingering patterns

Commit these to memory as they will appear often



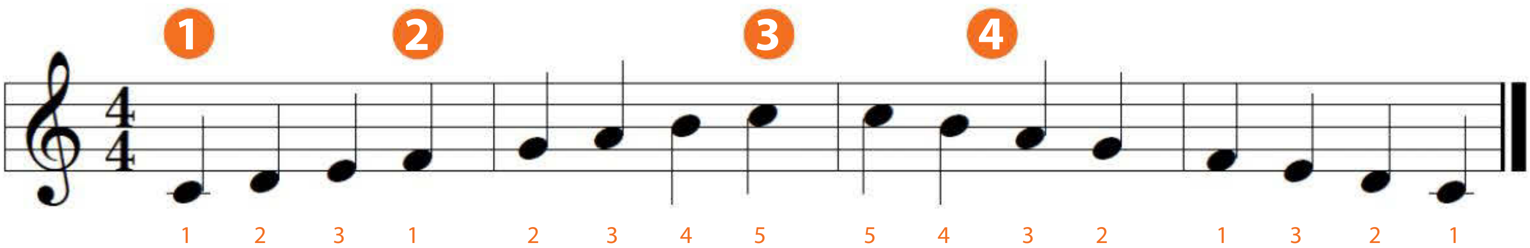
Top tip

Learn your finger numbers

In piano theory the thumbs are labelled as number 1, index finger is 2, middle finger is 3, ring finger is 4 and your little finger is number 5. Learn this to ease your progress! The correct finger patterns are essential if you want to play scales quickly.

Playing the C major scale

Let's start with the right hand





01 Starting position

Start with your thumb on Middle C. This is the white key directly left of the group of two black keys. Middle C is the fourth C from the lowest end of a standard piano, and the closest one to the middle of the keyboard.



02 The first four notes

Play Middle C with your thumb (1) then play the notes D and E in succession with the index (2) and middle (3) finger. For the fourth note F, you will need to tuck your thumb (1) underneath your middle finger.



03 Completing the ascending scale

Next you will need to play the notes G-A-B with your index (2), middle (3) and ring finger (4) in succession and finally finish the ascending or upwards part of the scale with your little finger (5) on C.

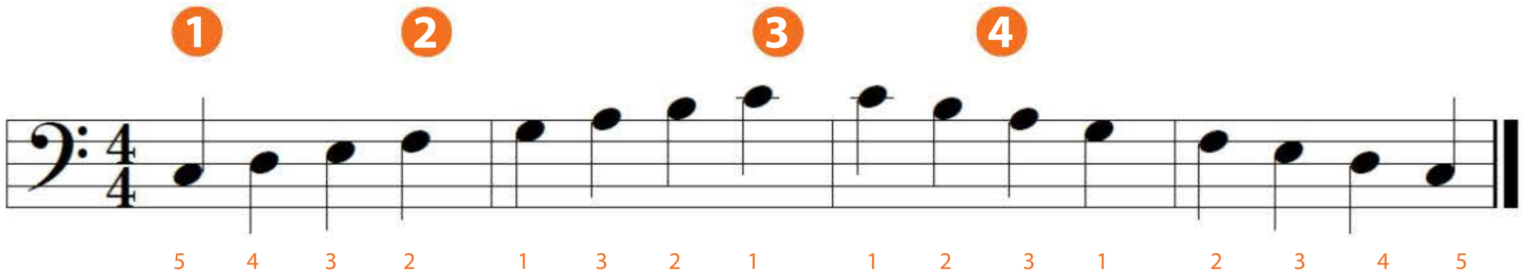


04 Descending

Go back down the scale, or descend by following the top C (5) with B (4), then A (3), G (2) and F (1). Your middle finger (3) then crosses over your thumb to play E followed by D (2) and finally C (1).

Switch to the left hand

You can play C major with your right hand, now try the left







01 Where to start

C major for the left hand begins with your little finger (5) and is played lower down the piano. Place your little finger on the C that is one octave below, or seven white keys to the left of Middle C (not including Middle C).

02 The first five notes

Play the beginning C with your little finger (5), then follow that with the notes D-E-F-G in succession with your ring finger (4), middle finger (3), index finger (2) and then your thumb (1).





03 Finishing the ascending scale

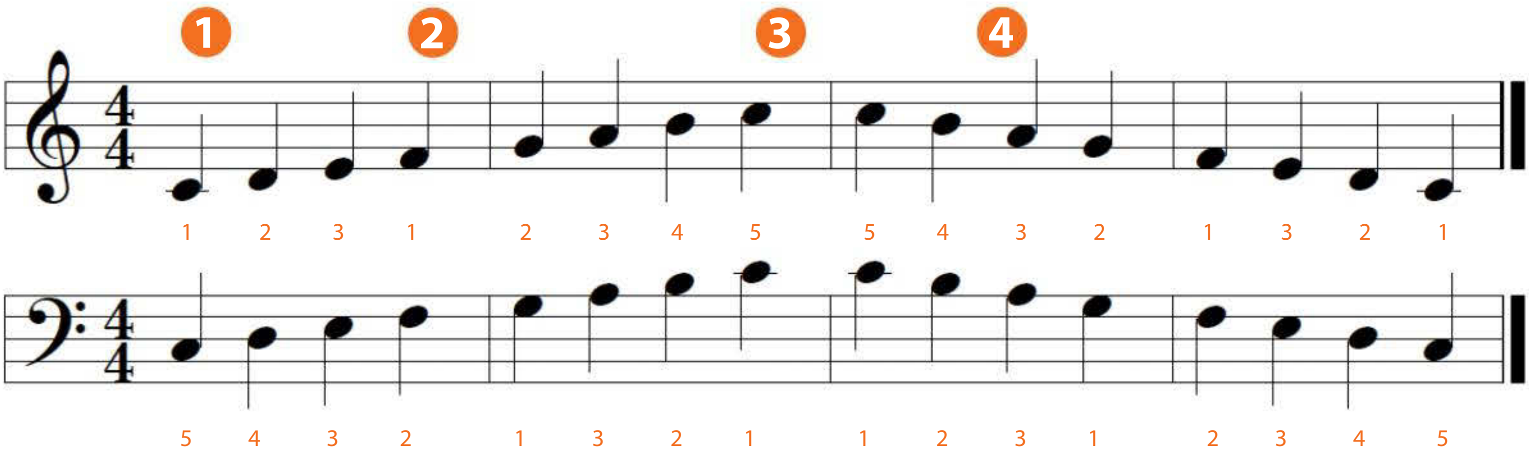
Next you will need to bring your middle finger (3) over the top of your thumb to play A. Finish the ascension by playing B with your index finger (2) and the top C with your thumb (1).

04 Descending

After playing your top C, go directly back down the scale playing B (2) then A (3). Next, bring your thumb underneath your middle finger and complete the scale by playing the following: G (1), F (2), E (3), D (4), C (5).

C major with both hands

See how the right and left hand sound together







01 The starting position

Next you can learn to play the C major scale ascending and descending with both hands together. Place your hands on their starting notes of C, with the right-hand thumb on Middle C and the left-hand little finger an octave below.

02 Going up

It may take a bit of practice to get used to the hands moving together. Follow the finger pattern you have learnt for each hand to ascend up the scale. The only difference is that both hands are playing together instead of individually.





03 Tricky tucks and turns

It will feel rather clumsy at first doing the thumb tucks and finger-over parts to the scale, as these are not done simultaneously between the right and left hand. Remember that right hand tucks first, the left hand turns over!

04 Perfecting the scale

Practise your ascension a few times slowly and when you are happy, try descending. The same rules apply here, just follow the patterns, become more and more used to the pattern and your co-ordination will improve.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

The F major scale

Follow on from C major with this new scale, which contains a black key

Musical notes are named after the first seven letters of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F and G. On a piano, these notes are represented by the white keys. When you play your C major scale you start with a C and then ascend up through the successive letters to G after which the pattern returns back to A and carries on from there. This is the same for the entire length of the keyboard. The white keys simply repeat A through to G over and over again.

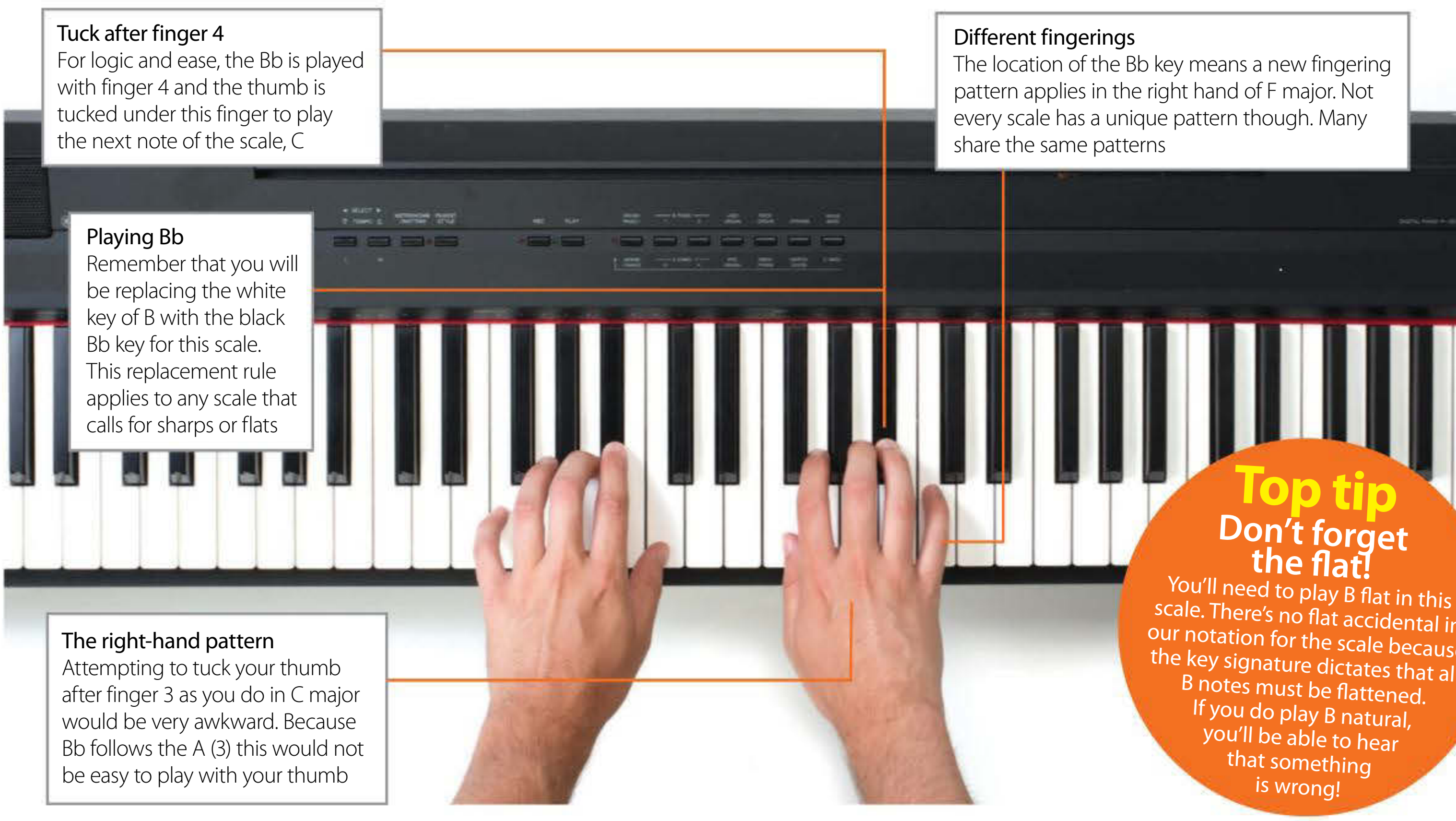
Any set of eight notes together is referred to as an octave and the scales you learn as a beginner will tend to be of a single octave. In addition to the white keys of the piano there are black keys, although there are fewer of them. You will notice that the black keys are grouped together in alternate sets of two, then three. The C major scale is a great one to start with because it does not contain any black keys. All the other major scales, however, do use one or more of the black keys. In musical terms, these are referred to as either sharps or flats. The musical symbol for a sharp is # and the symbol for flat is b. Don't worry if it all seems a little confusing; things will become much clearer as you progress.

The F major is a good scale to try next as it only contains one black key, a Bb (B flat). The Bb key is located between the A and B white keys. So let's get going and start taming this scale.

"Any set of eight notes together is referred to as an octave and the scales you learn as a beginner will tend to be of a single octave"

Tips for playing F major

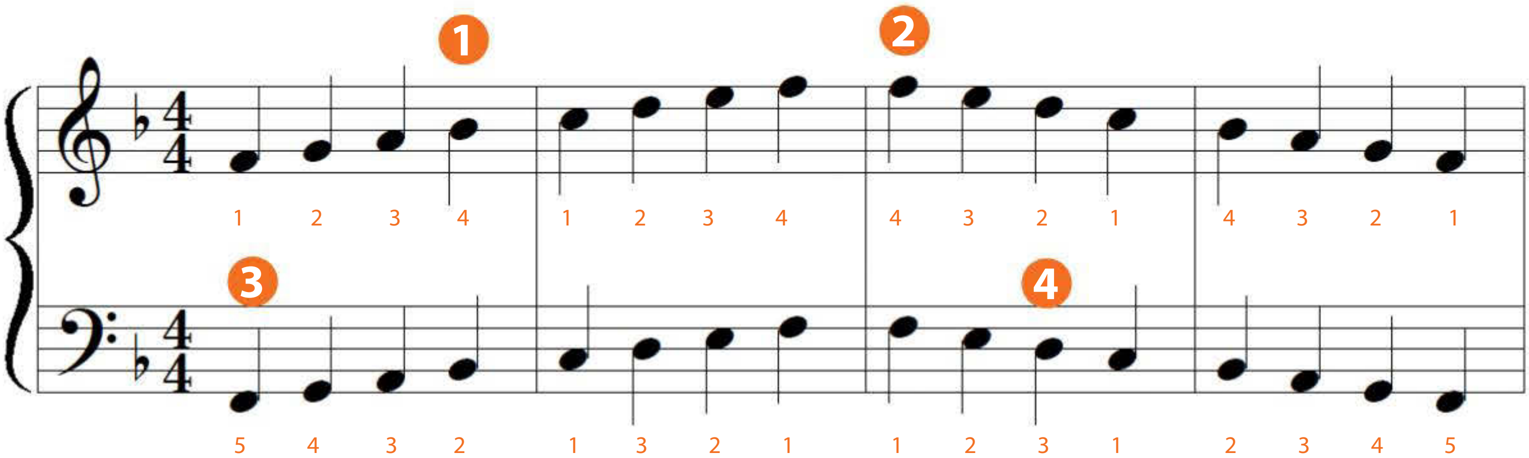
This scale contains a black key: B flat (Bb)



Top tip
Don't forget the flat!
You'll need to play B flat in this scale. There's no flat accidental in our notation for the scale because the key signature dictates that all B notes must be flattened. If you do play B natural, you'll be able to hear that something is wrong!

F major on both hands

Master this one-flat scale







01 Ascending from the starting position

Place your thumb (1) on the F key located four keys above Middle C. Follow on with the notes G (2) and A (3), then use finger 4 to play Bb. Finally, tuck your thumb underneath to play C and finish with the notes D (2), E (3) and F (4).

02 Descending

Your small finger gets a break in F major as the pattern does not require finger 5. To descend, simply follow the pattern outlined in Step 1 in the reverse order, bringing finger 4 over the thumb to play the Bb.





03 Your left hand

Find the F that is situated two octaves below the F used as your starting note for the right hand. With finger 5 of your left hand, begin the scale moving through the notes G (4) and A (3).

04 Finish the ascent, and then descend

Play Bb with finger 2, then play C (1). Finish the ascent by bringing finger 3 over your thumb to play D followed by E (2) and F (1). Descend using the same pattern in reverse, tucking your thumb under finger 3.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

The G major scale

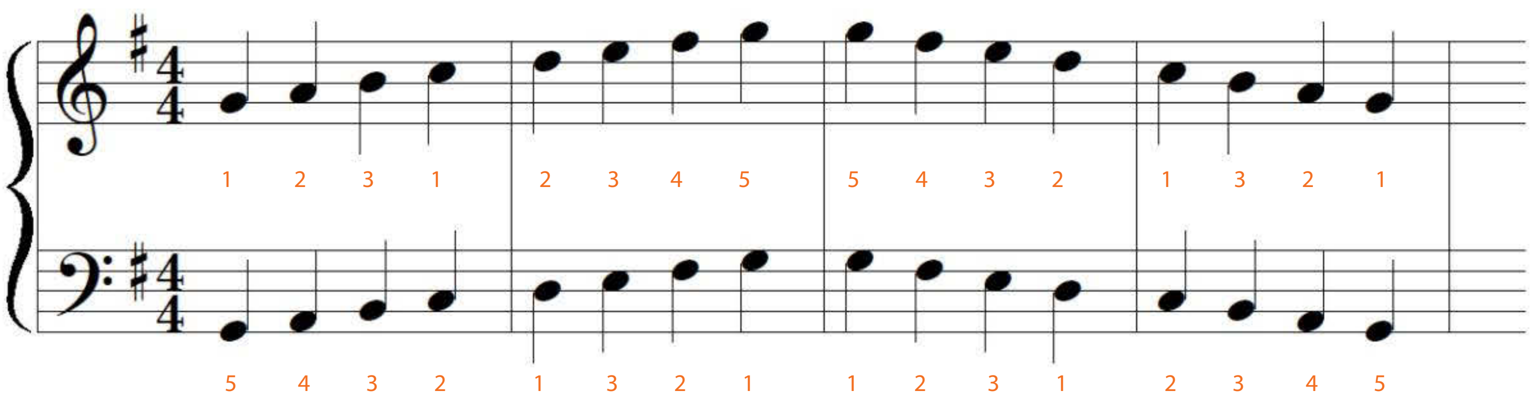
The major scale that's a fifth after C has just one sharp: F sharp

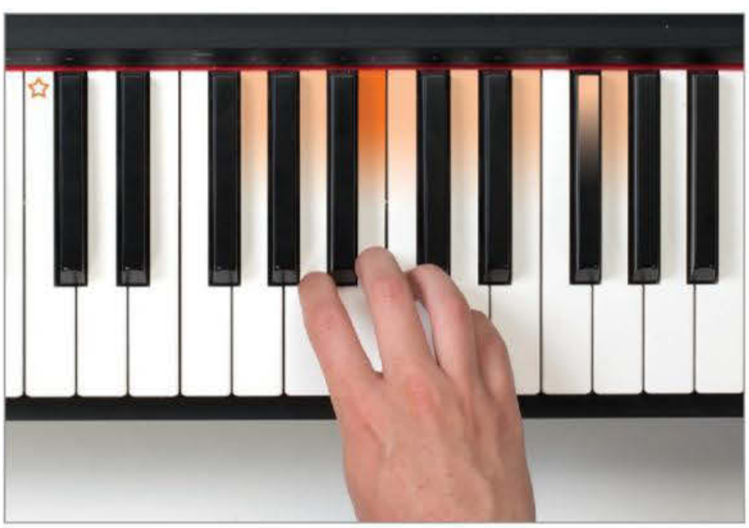
As we have observed, there are seven different white keys (notes): A, B, C, D, E, F and G. For each set of seven white keys however, there are only five black keys. Each of the black keys can be known by either its sharp name, or its flat name. Remember, the 'flat' of a white key is always below the note, and the 'sharp' is always above.

The black key used in the F major scale is the note Bb which replaces B for that scale. In other scales, the same black note might be referred to as an A#. In this way, some scales use the flat names for the black notes used, and some use the sharp names, but they will never use both. Adding together the seven white keys or notes, with the five black keys gives us the sum total of 12 notes each with its own unique pitch or sound frequency.

There are 12 different major scales in all, one beginning on each of the 12 notes. You have already seen how to play C major, the scale with no sharps or flats and F major, having one flat. The next scale to learn is G major. This scale also contains a single black key, but this time it is referred to as a sharp. The sharp note in G major is F#, located between the F and G keys.

> "Some scales use the flat names for the black notes used and some use the sharp names, but they will never use both"





01 The right hand
Start with your thumb on G (four notes above middle C) and follow the pattern: G (1), A (2), B (3), C (1) (tuck), D (2), E (3), F# (4), G (5). Notice that the fingering pattern is the same as C major. Descend in reverse order.



02 The left hand
Begin with your small finger on the G situated two octaves below the right hand starting G, and follow the same fingering pattern that you learned for C major: G (5), A (4), B (3), C (2), D (1), E (3) (bring over thumb), F# (2), G (1). Now descend.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

The D major scale

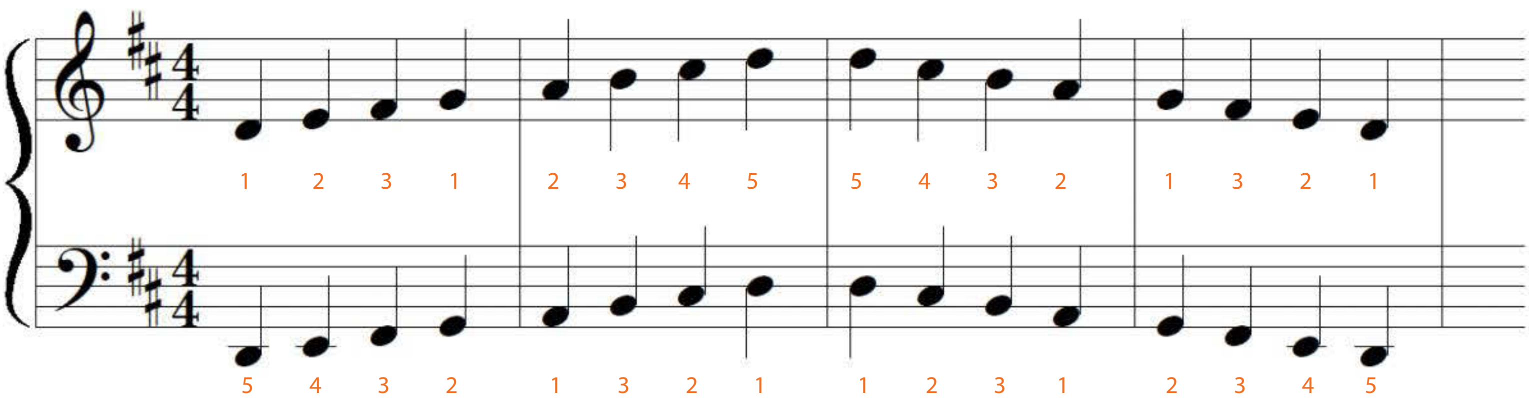
Discover the scale with two sharps and begin to understand the pattern of the major scales

Every one of the 12 major scales has its own unique set of sharps or flats. The collection of sharps or flats found in a scale is known as the key signature, which in written music is situated right next to the clef at the beginning of each line of music. So far you have learnt to play three different major scales: C major (no sharps or flats), F major (one flat) and G major (one sharp). F major, containing one flat, is followed by a scale containing two flats. Likewise, the scale that follows G major has two sharps. This scale is D major.

You may begin to notice a pattern emerging here concerning the scales that contain sharps. First you learned C major, the scale without sharps (or flats). Then came G major containing one sharp (F#). Next you will learn the scale with two sharps, D major. The pattern surfacing is that there are exactly five notes between each of the scales. Start with C (no sharps or flats), count up five notes (C-D-E-F-G) and you arrive at G (one sharp = F#). Count up another five notes (G-A-B-C-D) and you arrive at D (two sharps = F# and C#). This pattern continues, adding a sharp each time and is what is known as the circle (or cycle) of fifths – see page 60 for more information on it.

The F# in the D major scale replaces the F, with the C# played instead of C. Just remember to locate the sharps on the piano before you begin to play the scale.

> "Remember to locate the sharps on the piano before you begin to play the scale"





01 The right hand
Begin with your thumb on the D just above middle C. Play the following notes to ascend up the scale: D (1), E (2), F# (3), G (1) (tucked), A (2), B (3), C# (4) and D (5). You'll notice the pattern is identical to C major. Descend in the reverse order.



02 The left hand
Starting on the D key two octaves below the one used for right hand, play the following notes: D (5), E (4), F# (3), G (2), A (1), B (3), C# (2) and D (1). Again, the pattern is the same as that of C major. Descend in reverse.

Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Introducing minor scales

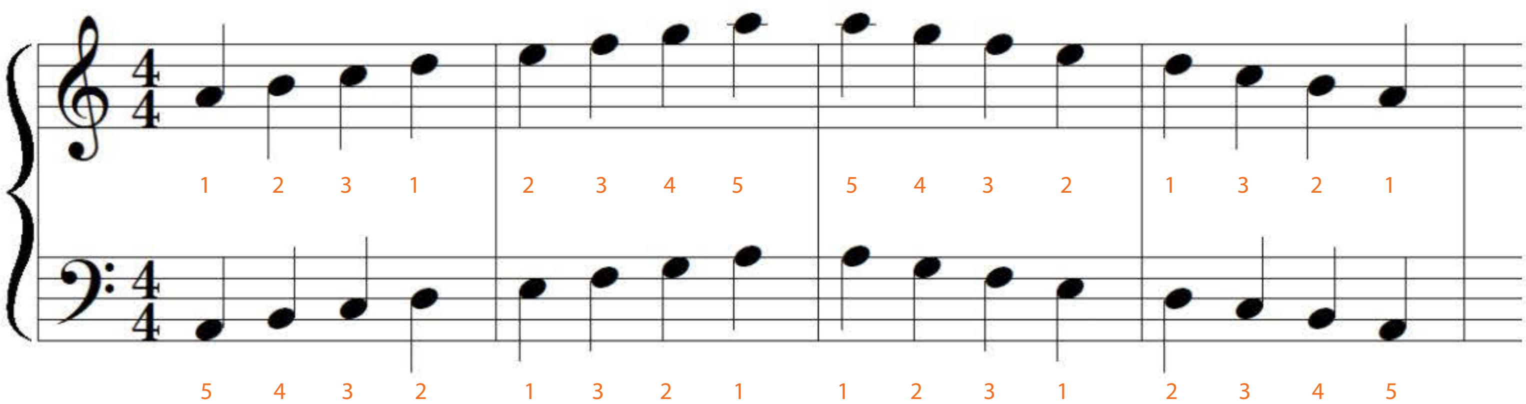
Time to tackle this new type of scale

The most important type of scale to learn next is the minor scale. Unlike the major scale, the minor scale comes in three different formats: the natural minor, the harmonic minor and the melodic minor. This means that for any given minor scale, there is not one pattern to master, but three. Don't worry if this sounds daunting as the three different formats are all centred on the same series of notes; they just have slight variations which are useful to learn and understand. With a little bit of practice you will soon be adept at playing all three types of minor scale.

The A minor scale is the equivalent to the C major scale because it has no sharps or flats. In musical terms, this is referred to as the relative scale (eg A is the relative minor to C, or C is the relative major to A). Therefore, A minor is the obvious choice as an introduction. You can find a major key's relative minor by counting three semitones lower (A is three semitones lower than C).

As already noted, there are three different kinds of minor scale. The natural minor is the foundation scale, sharing the exact same set of notes as its relative major (C), but starting and ending on A rather than C (A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A). The harmonic minor has only one alteration: the seventh note (in this case, a G) is raised a semitone higher and is replaced with G#. In the melodic minor, both the sixth and the seventh note are raised but then lowered again during the descent.

The A natural minor scale





01 The right hand
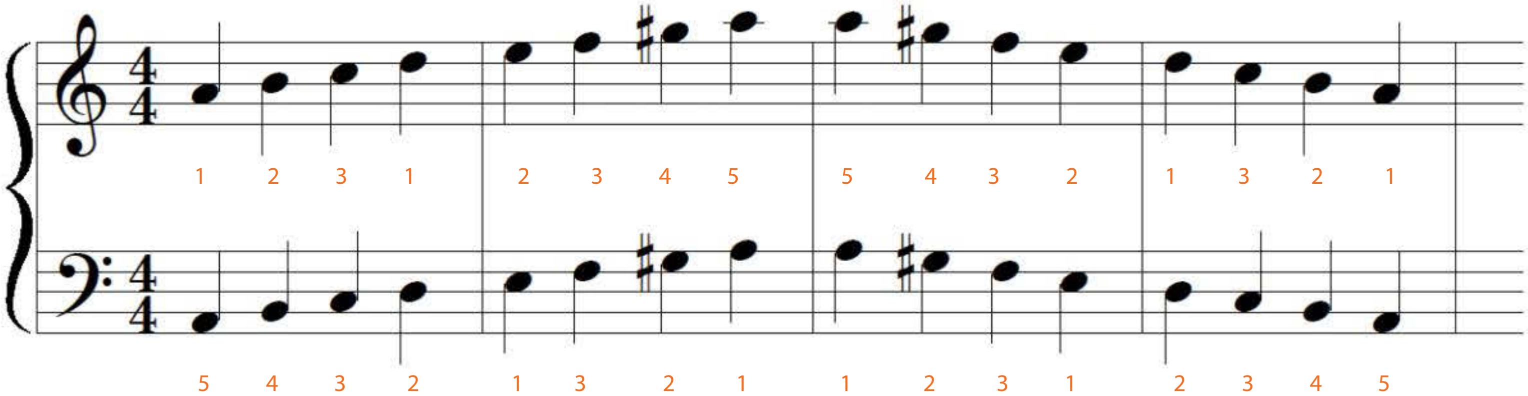
Place your thumb on the A key located six keys above middle C. Follow the same fingering pattern used for C major, playing the notes A-B-C-D-E-F-G and A. You will discover that this scale sounds very different to a major.



02 Left hand and hands together

After ascending and descending with your right hand, do the same with the left. Start on the A key situated an octave lower down and follow the C major fingering pattern with the A minor notes. Now try hands together!

The A harmonic minor scale
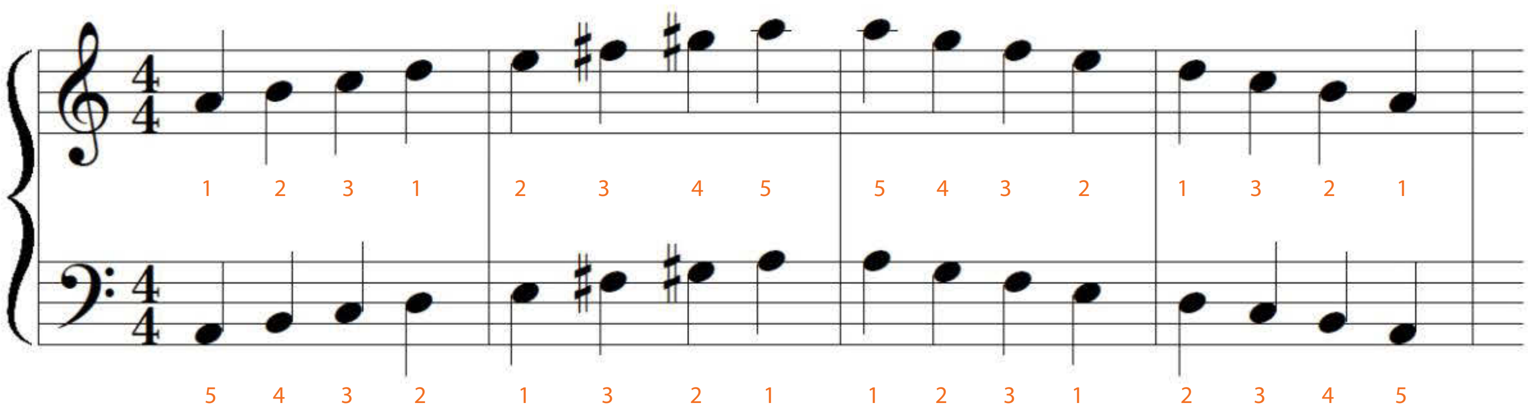




03 Raising the seventh note
Follow the steps for the natural minor. The only change is to raise the seventh note, replacing the G with a G#. You will notice an increased intensity.



04 Practising the scale
Play the A natural minor and A harmonic minor with the right hand to understand the difference. Do the same with the left hand and hands together.

The A melodic minor scale





05 Raising notes in the ascending scale
A melodic minor has the same fingering pattern as A natural minor. The change is to raise the sixth and the seventh notes, giving us: A, B, C, D, E, F#, G#, A.



06 Lowering the notes on descent
When descending, the two notes that were raised are now lowered back to their naturals or white keys, making the descent the same as A natural minor.

Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

D minor scales

D minor follows from A minor, spicing things up by adding a flat to its key signature

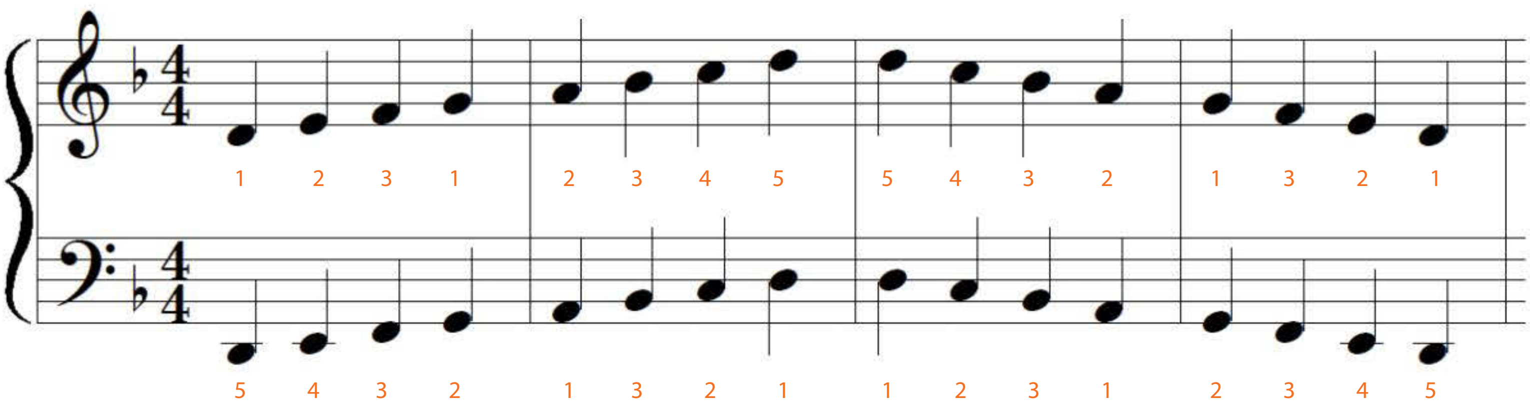
Just like major scales, the minor scales follow a cycle, adding either a sharp or a flat with each new scale. The next minor scale to learn is D minor which has one flat; B♭. The relative major scale to D minor is F major, as it also contains the same single flat note.

As with A minor, you will learn three formats: the natural minor, the harmonic minor and the melodic minor. These contain only a slight change but each sounds very unique. It is important to understand the three types of minor scale, as their sequences will appear in the music you will go on to learn.

The D natural minor scale uses the same notes found in the F major scale, beginning and ending on D: D-E-F-G-A-B♭-C-D. In the D harmonic minor, the seventh note needs to be raised one semitone. A semitone refers to the smallest possible distance between two notes, basically the distance between two notes directly next to each other. In most cases, the note directly next to a white key on either side is a black key. For example, to raise a G one semitone, you simply go to the black note above of G#. With a B however, the next key is a white one – C. So for B, a semitone above is actually C.

> "It is important to understand the three types of minor scale, as their sequences will appear in the music you will go on to learn"

D natural minor





01 The right hand

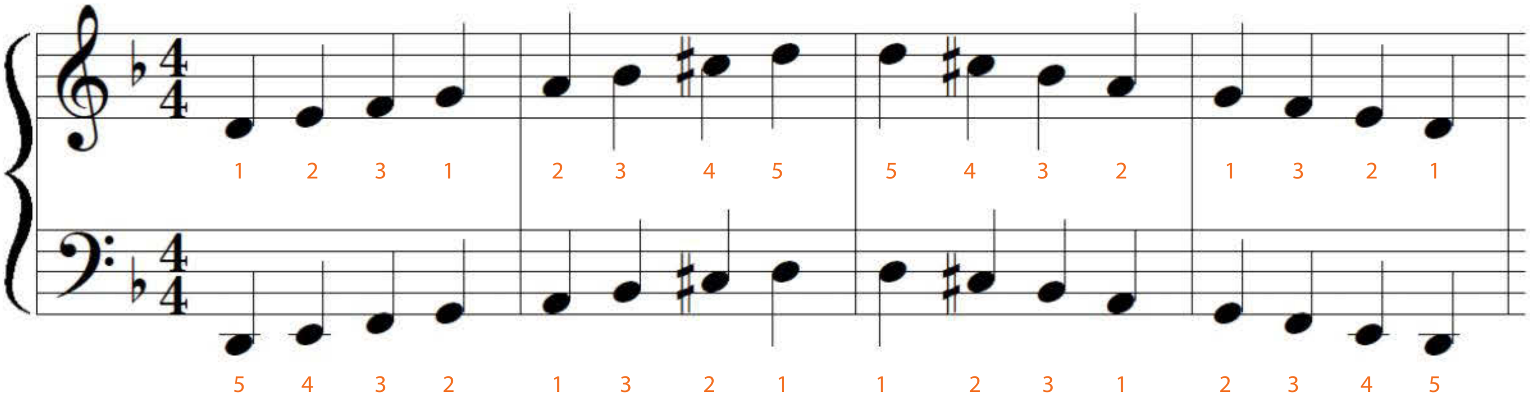
For D natural minor, the fingering pattern used in C major is again employed. For the right hand, the sequence is: D (1), E (2), F (3), G (1) (tucked), A (2), B♭ (3), C (4), D (5). Begin on the D one note above Middle C.



02 Your left hand

Once you have ascended and descended a few times with your right hand, try the left hand beginning two octaves lower. The notes are the same as for Step 1, and the fingering pattern is again the same as C major.

D harmonic minor







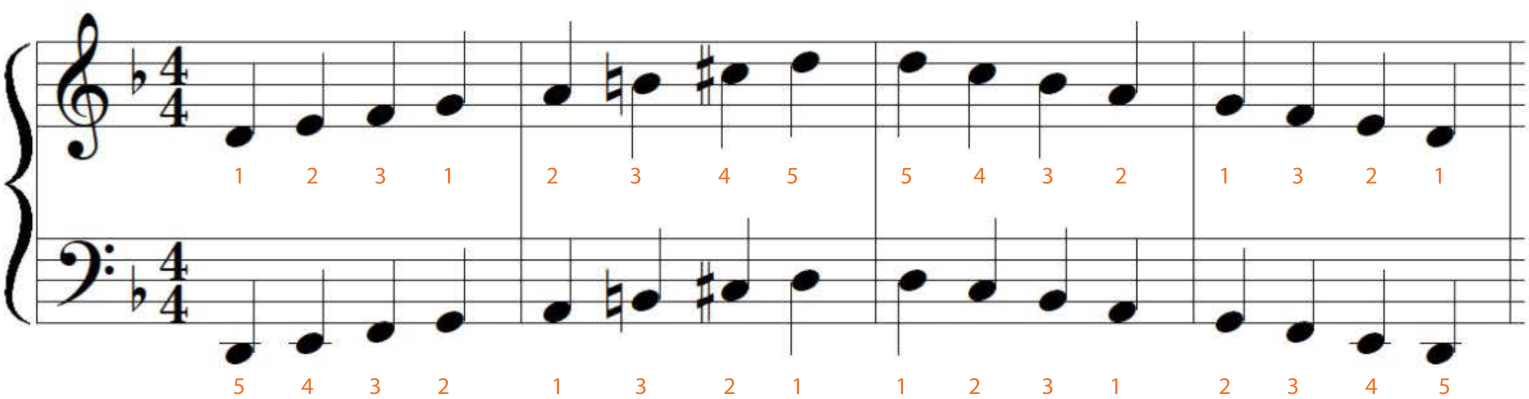
03 A flat and a sharp in the same scale

Even though D minor has a B♭ in the key signature, the raised 7th will still be labelled as a sharp. Play with your right hand: D-E-F-G-A-B♭-C#-D.

04 The left hand

Follow the same notes as for the right hand, starting two octaves lower. Practise the scale with hands separately, then together.

D melodic minor







05 Raising B flat to B natural

For D melodic minor both the sixth and the seventh note need to be raised during the ascent. This means B♭ rises to B natural and C rises to C#.

06 The notes to play

On the descent you need to lower the sixth and seventh back to the notes of the D natural minor scale: D-C-B♭-A-G-F-E-D.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Learn about intervals

Take the next step and play more than one note at the same time on the same hand

So far, we have only played one note per hand, but the polyphonic nature of the piano means that we can play up ten notes at the same time. This is very rare, however, and most of the time you will be playing two, three or sometimes four notes with the same hand. We'll be talking about playing three and four notes at the same time in the chord walkthroughs, but for now let's look at playing two notes together and how the intervals between them will affect your sound.

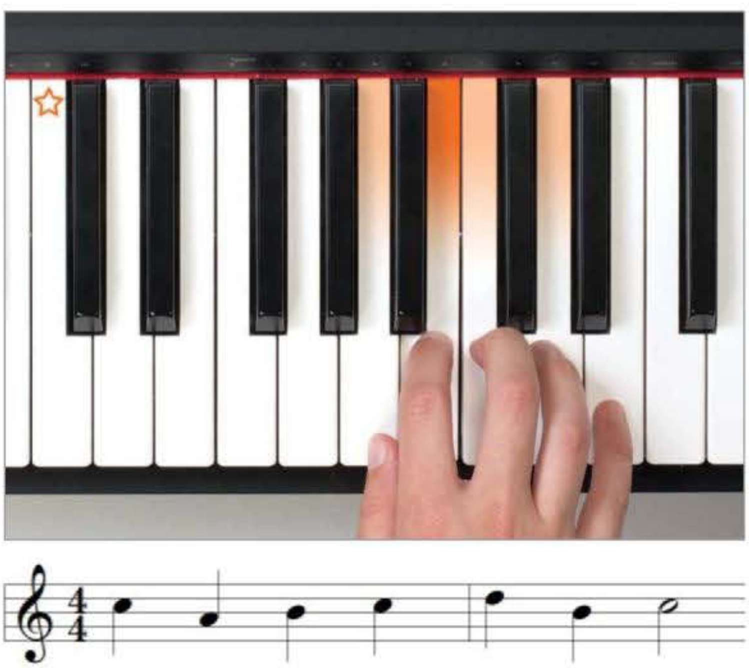
In music theory terms, an interval is the difference between two notes (not necessarily played at the same time), and they are often measured in semitones. A semitone is the interval between two adjacent keys on the keyboard, and two of these semitones make up a tone. So, there is a semitone between C and C#, but a tone between C and D. But rather than just naming intervals after the number of semitones between the notes, they are all called different names, which you can see in the table to the right.

In this tutorial we will take a basic melody and slowly add a harmony to it, identifying different intervals in the process.

Interval	Distance
Minor third	3 semitones
Major third	4 semitones
Perfect fourth	5 semitones
Tritone	6 semitones
Perfect fifth	7 semitones
Minor sixth	8 semitones
Major sixth	9 semitones
Perfect octave	12 semitones

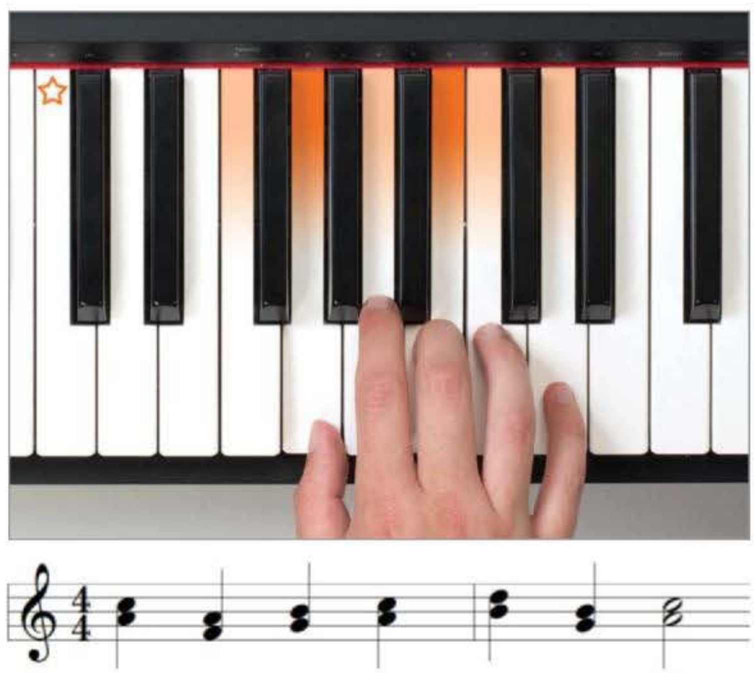
Create a tune with intervals

See how different intervals affect a right-hand melody



01 Make your melody

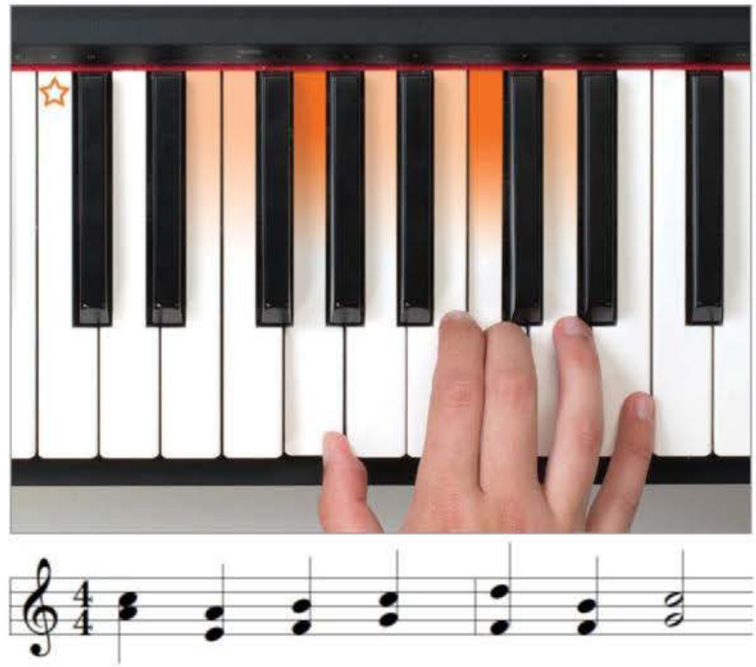
First of all, write a short but catchy melody of no more than two bars. We recommend sticking with C major as it's easier to experiment as you can play around with only the white keys.



02 Add a harmony

Now you've got a melody sorted, add a harmony to it. All our additional notes are three or four semitones below the original melody, but you can experiment with other intervals. We'd advise sticking to only the white keys at this point.





03 A sixth below

We're keeping our melody from Step 1, but changing up the harmony. This time we're keeping a harmony with a constant interval but now it's a sixth below. You may find this easier as you can keep your hands in the same position.
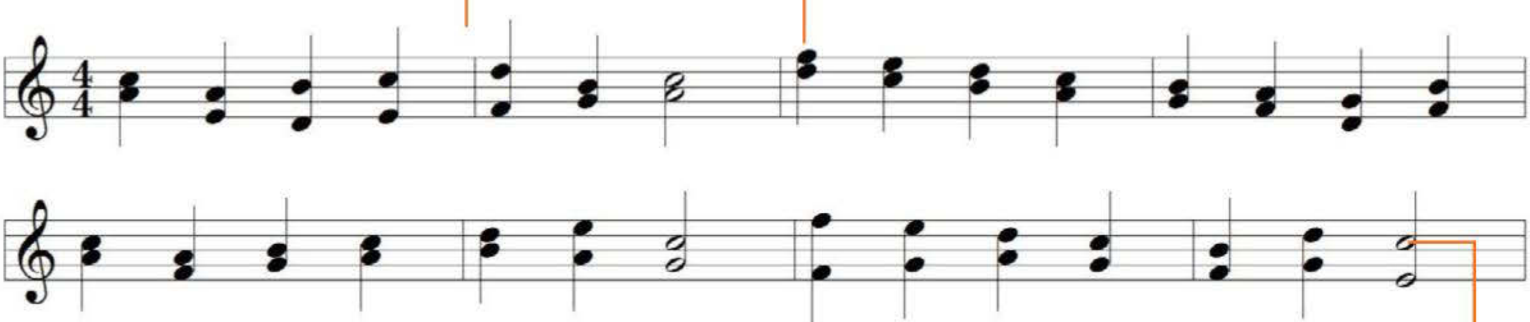
04 Mixing it up

Now you know what your tune sounds like with a harmony at a constant interval, mix it up a bit. Keep your original melody, but harmonise it with different intervals. As long as you stick to the white notes, it should sound good.

Put it into practice A developed right-hand melody with harmony

The beginning
Straight away, you can see that the intervals between notes can vary. Here are thirds, fourths and sixes

Run down
This passage is a mix of major and minor thirds. Minor thirds have a distance of three semitones between them, while major thirds have four

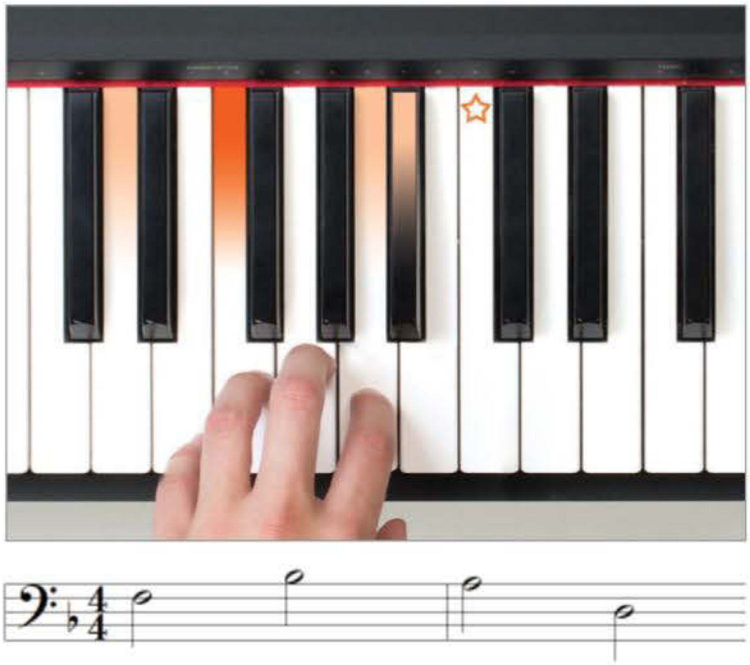


Octaves
An under-used interval – especially in the right hand – is the octave. It may be the same note, but you can still get a really good sound

Ending
Our piece is in C major (no sharps or flats), so it makes sense to end on an interval that includes two members of the C major triad

Left-hand intervals

Building an accompaniment



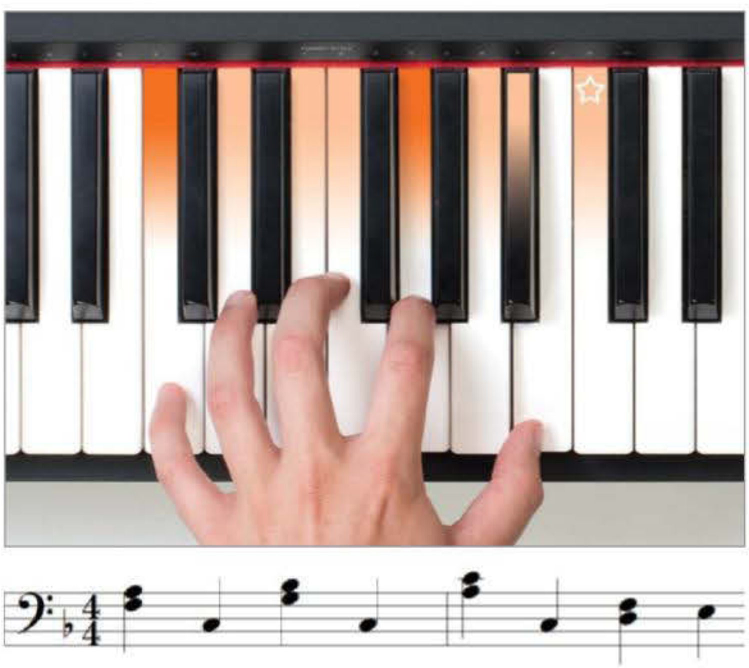
01 Basic note progression

To start with, put four notes together. We're playing in F major to vary things, but there's no harm in sticking in C major if you don't feel confident, or indeed if you want to add more to your right-hand melody.



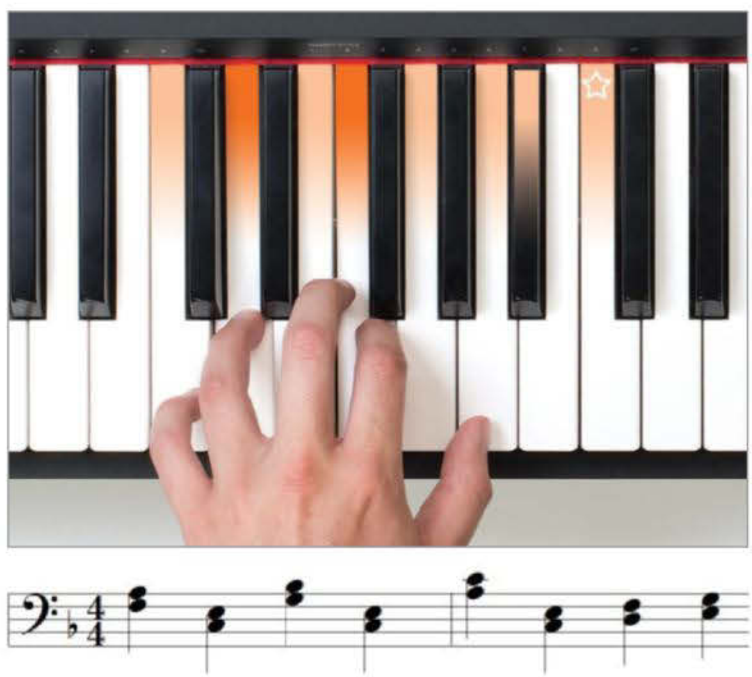
02 Add a harmony

Like we did with the right-hand tune, you can now add a harmony to your four notes. As well as varying the intervals, try changing up whether they're intervals above or below. You can completely change the sound of your tune.



03 Development

Just because you're playing two notes together in intervals, you don't need to harmonise every note. Take this opportunity to develop your bass line, perhaps by adding in some notes on their own, while keeping your notes from Step 2.
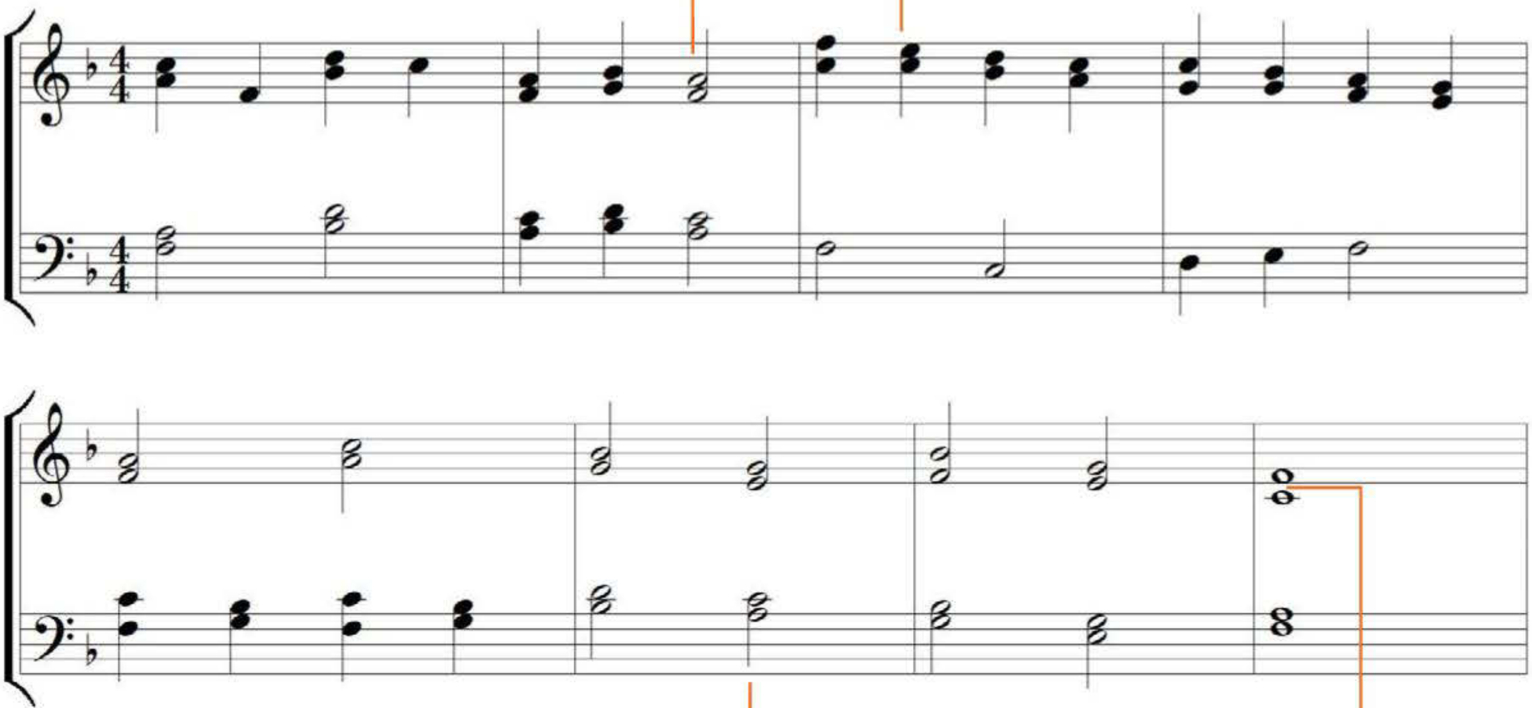


04 Use your whole hand

Of course, you can just play two or more notes at every opportunity! In fact, doing so is a great way to get every finger on your hand moving. Try playing the passage above with the same two fingers every time and it'll be a struggle.

Thirds on both hands
Don't be afraid to play the same interval on both hands, although if your left hand is playing lower down it might be best to just play single notes

Run down
This is similar to the run down in our right-hand-only piece, except there's a perfect fourth on the first beat of both bars



Minor seventh
These two minor thirds are on different staves, but together they form Am7 – A minor seventh. It adds a jazzy sound to the ending of our piece

F major
The tune is in F major – as you can tell by the key signature. We've ended it on a straight F major chord with all three notes represented

Octaves

Don't forget about this convenient interval

With all these minor thirds and perfect fifths, it's easy to forget about the octave. An octave is spread across 12 semitones and eight notes. Whatever the root note of your two-note chord, its octave will always have the same name: the octave of Middle C will be another C note.

Octaves have many uses too. For example, in the right hand you can double a melody in octaves to give it another dimension. If you want a delicate melody high up the keyboard but you think it sounds too weak, add in the octave below and hear the sound get stronger. It's best to keep this melody simple to start with, as moving between the octaves is hard work.

Octaves can also be used with the left hand as a simple accompaniment pattern. It won't work quite as well as a melody option, but it's a great way to support the tune.



Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Understanding chords

How to construct and play common chords

A chord is a set of three or more notes played at the same time, and they are an integral part of music. When they are played in sequence it is known as a chord progression, and a well thought-out progression can transform an average song into a great one. Fortunately, we can use music theory and knowledge of the scales we've already covered to construct and experiment with different chords.

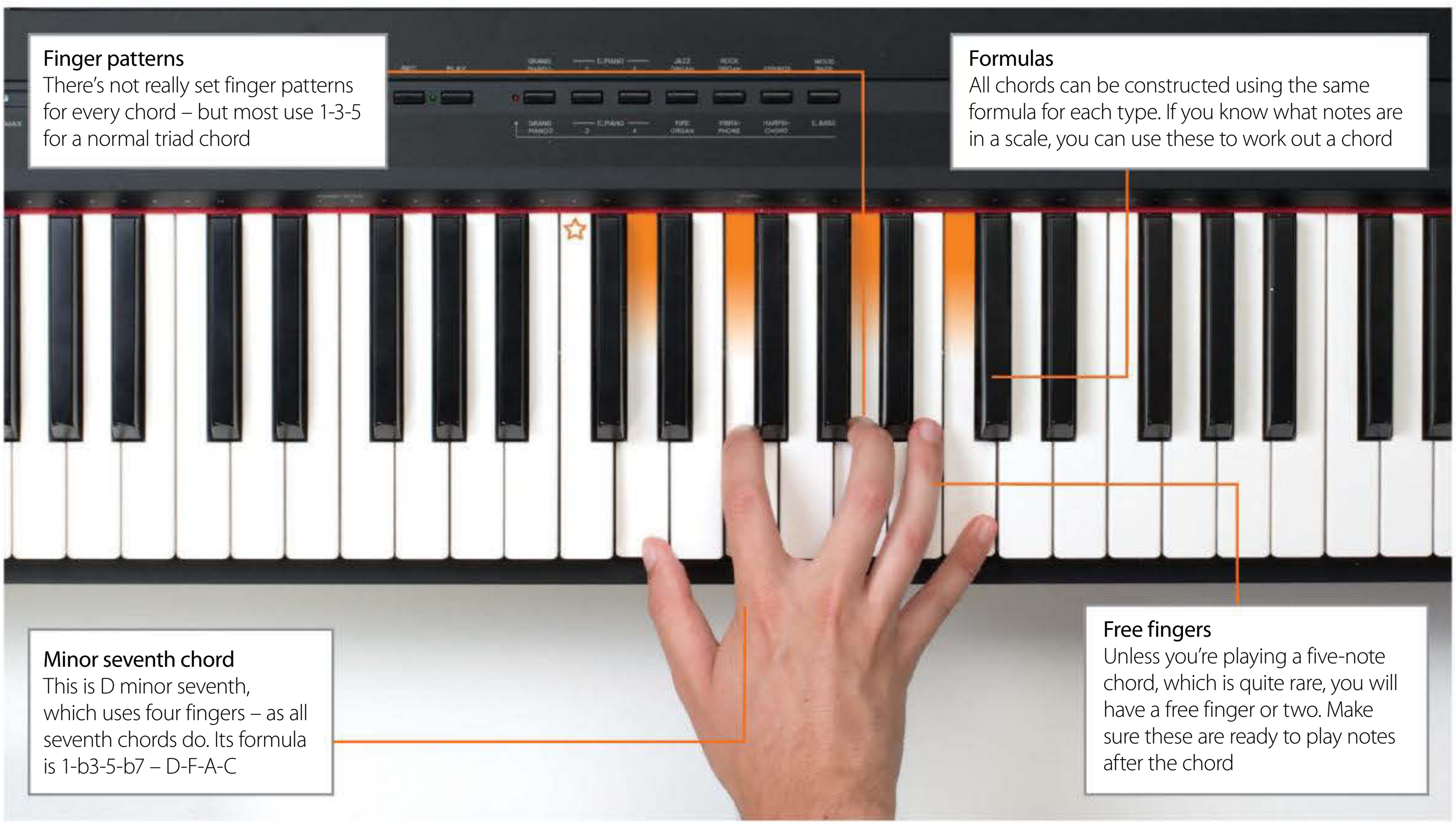
To play a three-note major chord (also known as a triad), you must play the first, third, and fifth note of its corresponding major scale. For example, if you want to play a C major chord, you would need to play the first, third and fifth note of the C major scale (C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C) together – so that would be C-E-G. The major chord isn't the only kind to have a formula like this. The table to the right lists many of the most common kinds of chords and how they are constructed.

When looking at the sheet music, you may see letters above a stave – these are chords that the melody is based on. If you find the right or left-hand part too challenging, then playing the correct chord instead will still sound great.

Chord type	Formula
Major	1-3-5
Minor	1-b3-5
Diminished	1-b3-b5
Augmented	1-3-#5
Dominant 7th	1-3-5-b7
Major seventh	1-3-5-7
Minor seventh	1-b3-5-b7
Sus2/Sus4	1-2-5/1-4-5

Right-hand chords

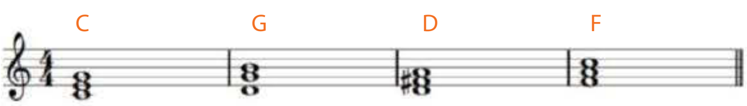
Playing three or more notes with one hand



Different chord types

A guide to some common chords

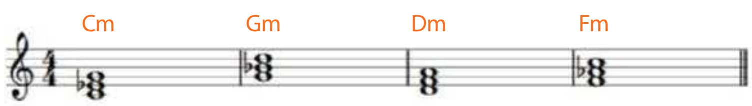




Major chords

Major triads are happy-sounding chords that are made by taking the first, third and fifth note from the chord's corresponding major scale. If a letter is written above the stave on its own, ie just 'D', then this means it's a major chord.

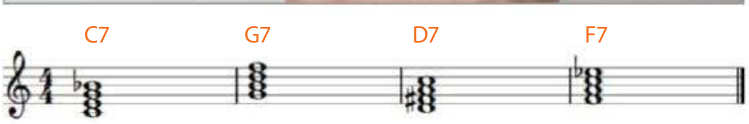




Minor chords

Minor chords carry a sad sound, which is created by flattening the third by a semitone (one key). Rather than play C-E-G to play C major, you play C-Eb-G for C minor. A lower-case 'm' will be above the stave for a minor chord.

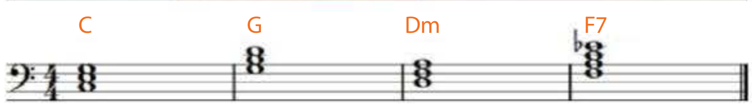




Dominant seventh chords

Seventh chords have four notes, and feature the first, third, fifth and flattened seventh notes of the corresponding major scale. C7 comprises C, E, G and Bb. The first three notes are the same as a major triad.





Left-hand chords

Don't think that chords are exclusive to the treble clef. Although we wouldn't recommend playing triads low down the keyboard, left-hand chords are useful when working out progressions, such as the one above.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Using inversions

Achieve a different take on many basic chords by employing inversions

Playing chords, no matter what kind, would be pretty boring if all you could do was play them the same way all the time. No matter how you changed the way you used them rhythmically, the notes would always sound the same. Luckily, you can use handy inversions to play the chords you think sound best but in different ways.

Rather than just playing C (the root), the E (the third) above it, and the G (the fifth) above that to play C major, you can start on E, then play the G above it, and then the C above the G (so you're playing the C that's an octave higher than the one play in the first chord). This is what's known as the first inversion of C major. It's still C major as it contains the three notes that make up the chord, they're just played in a different order. To play a second inversion on C major, the bass note must be G, the second note C (the same one that's played in the first inversion), and the third note the E after that. Although the chords are technically the same in name, the different sound you get can help add interest to a piece.
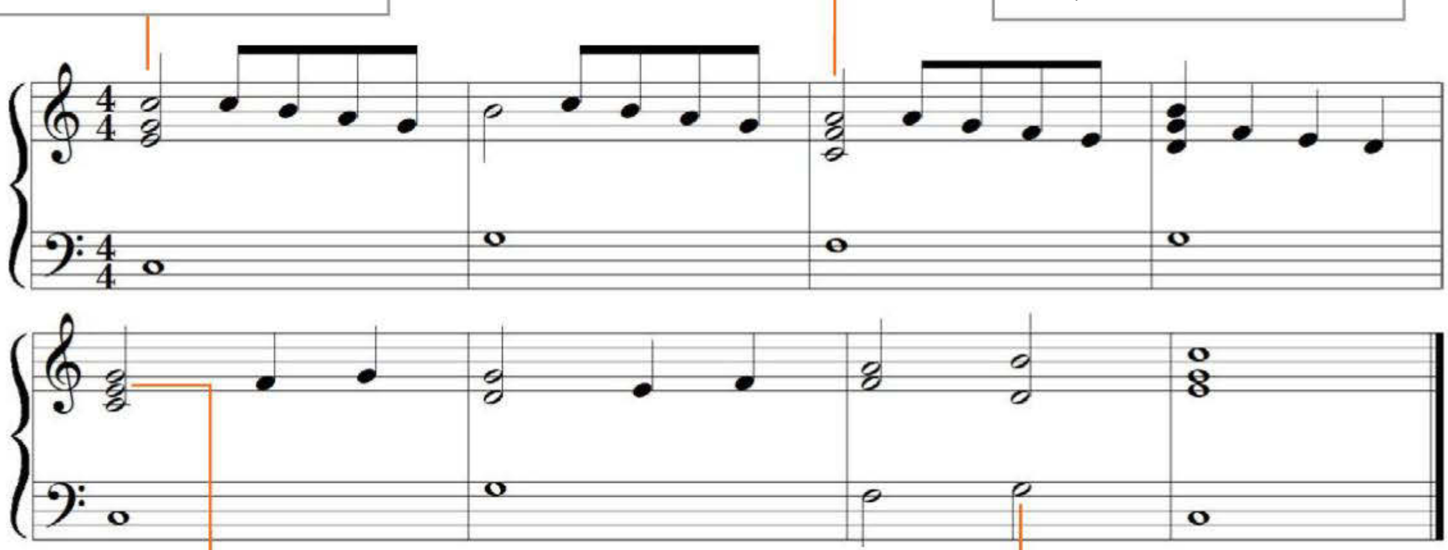
Inversions aren't just handy for varying sounds, though – they also help transition between chords. Let's imagine that you want to play C major then A minor. Rather than moving your whole hand down the keyboard to play both chords in the root position, you just need to move your little finger from the G to the A. Thanks to inversions, you can play completely different chords with the minimum of effort.

> "Inversions aren't just handy for varying sounds, they also help transition between chords"

Putting it into practice Inversions in music

C major
We start off with C major, but perhaps not as you know it. As E is the bass note, this is what's known as the first inversion

F major
Middle C is the bass note here, but it's not C major – this is the second inversion of F major, as it features C, A, and F



Root chord
Even with all these inversions, there's still no reason not to put in a chord in root position, like this C major

Both hands
Not an inversion as such, but you can spread chords over both hands. We've used G as a bass note, with D and B on the right hand

Inversion examples

See how inversions affect a chord's structure



Root chords

All four of these major triads are in root position – the root of the chord (the note which shares its name with the chord) is the bass note. To play this progression, you have to move your right hand a lot.



First inversion

We've used the same chords – C, G, D, and F major – but now their respective major thirds are the bass note rather than the root. The root note is still played, but it is an octave higher than in Step 1.



Second inversion

Now we're using the fifth as the bass note of our familiar four chords. Note that even though the G and F now have bass notes lower than the original root chord, they are still considered second inversions.



Mix them up

The previous examples have all required a bit of jumping up and down the keyboard, but by using the second inversions of G and F, it's a lot easier to navigate our progression. Try it for yourself!

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Major chords

Major chords are an essential tool for budding pianists, as an accompaniment or as part of a melody

A major chord comprises three notes played simultaneously: a root, a major third and a perfect fifth. The terms 'major third' and 'perfect fifth' arise as in the major scale of the root note these intervals are the third and fifth tones respectively. Some major chords are more commonly used than others, and as your repertoire increases you may notice how particular sequences of major chords form the basis of many popular and classical compositions. The root is the note that the chord is named after; C for C major, for example. To identify the major third count four semitones up from the root (four black or white keys); in C major (simply noted in music as C), the major third is E. To complete the triad count a further three semitones up from the major third; in C, the perfect fifth is G. Once you have mastered this formation you can use it to calculate any major chord. With practice you will find you can hear the 'happy' ambience that this structure creates in order to identify it. If a chord does not begin on its root note it is known as an inversion: the first inversion begins on the major third (in C major, this would produce the structure E-G-C); the second inversion begins on the perfect fifth (in C major, this would produce the structure G-C-E). Generally when playing major chords the common fingering is 5-3-1 in the left hand and 1-3-5 in the right.
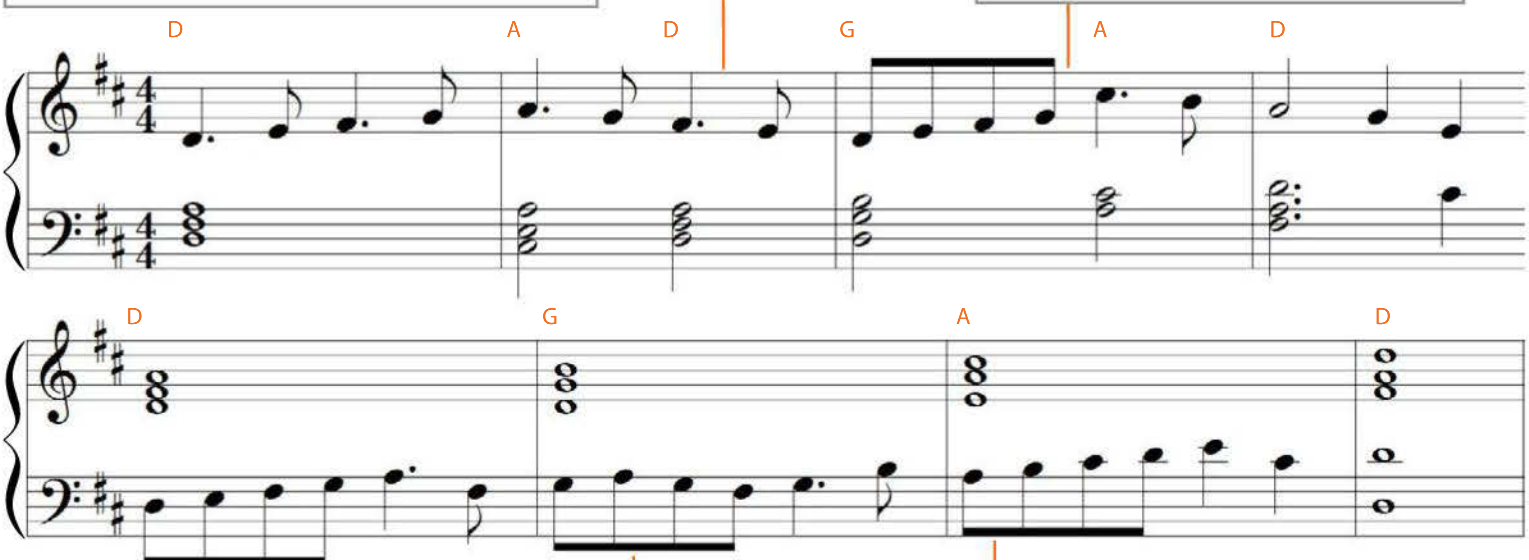
> "As your repertoire increases you may notice how particular sequences form the basis of many popular compositions"

Put it into practice

Now you have perfected these major chords, use them!

Bars 1 and 2
To switch between D major and A major in its first inversion, simply move your left third and fifth fingers together by two semitones each while keeping your thumb on the A

Bars 3 and 4
Here G major is in its second inversion and D is in its first. A major is not completed as leaving out the E creates a rising bass of B-C#-D

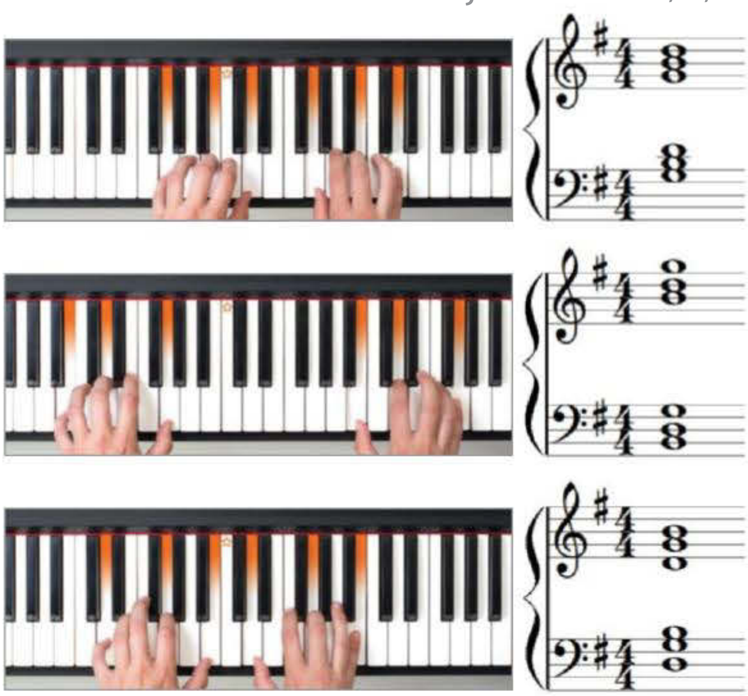


Bars 5 and 6
The chords are now in the right hand. To move to G major keep your thumb on the D and move your third and fifth fingers up together by two semitones

Bars 7 and 8
To move from A major in the second inversion to D major in the first inversion use your third finger on A as a pivot

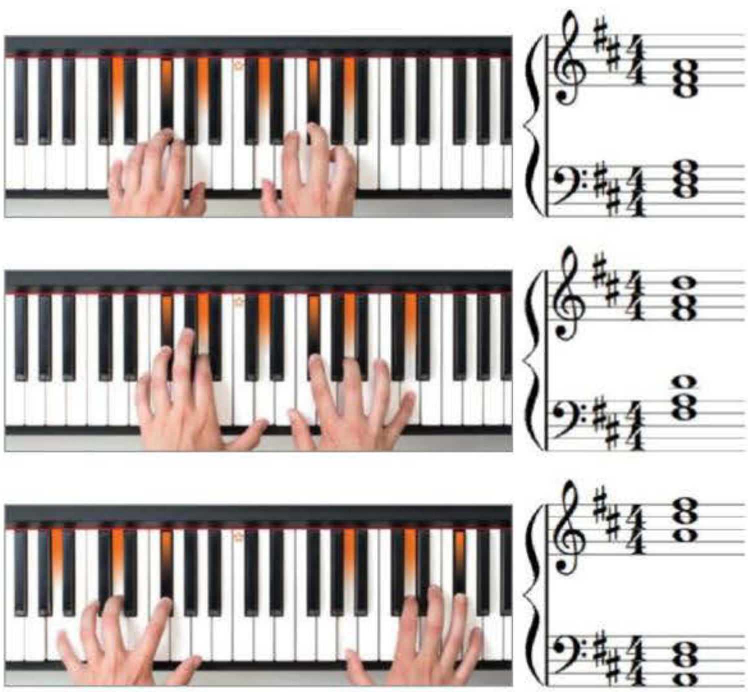
Common major chords

Here we learn four common major chords – G, C, D and A – along with their inversions



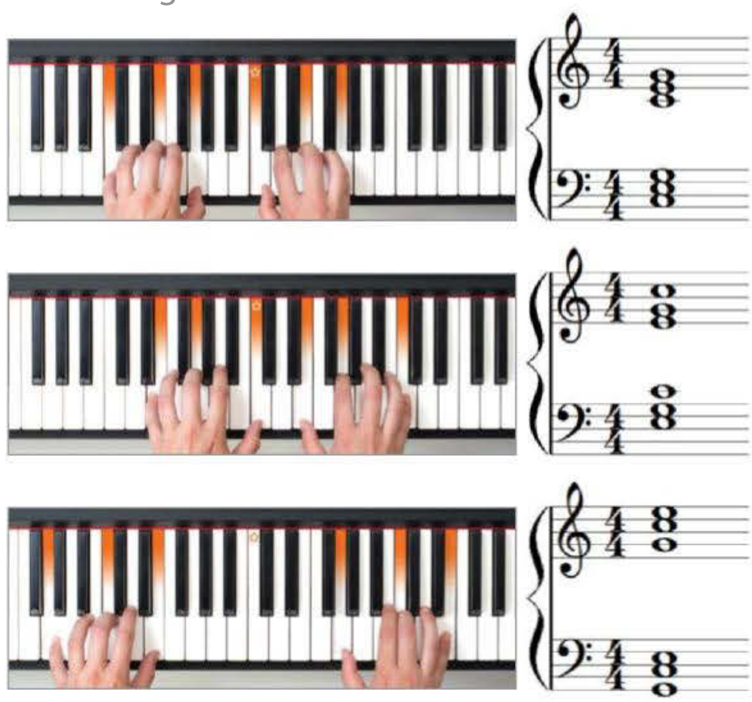
G major (G-B-D)

Play the chord in its root position with the right hand and then the left. Repeat with the first and second inversions, keeping the same fingering throughout. Inversions add an interesting twist without clashing with an overlying melody.



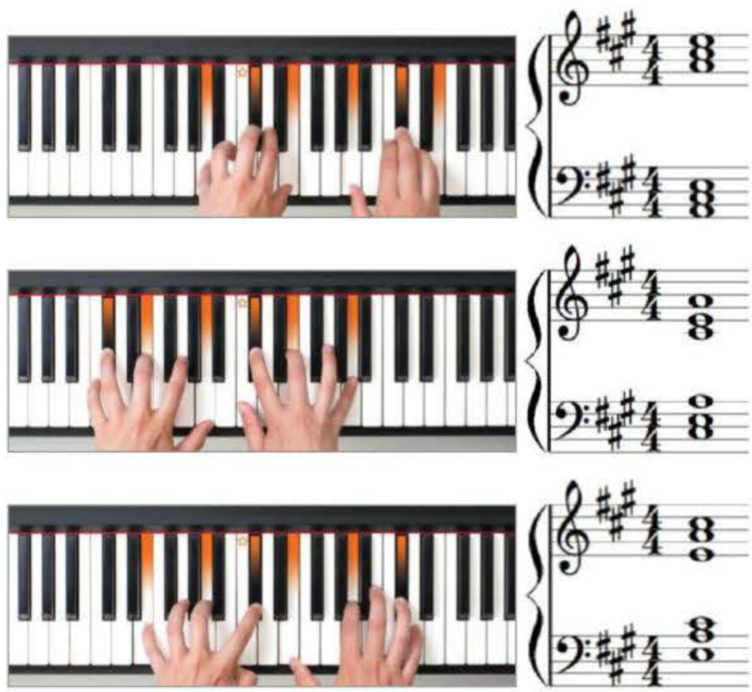
D major (D-F#-A)

By now you are probably getting the hang of inversions, so see if you can practise moving not only from root to first and first to second, but back down from second to root. Try skipping from second to root directly.



C major (C-E-G)

Repeat the exercise you have just learnt in G major, but this time try playing a few notes in the other hand whilst switching between inversions – there are no accidentals in C major so any white note will fit.



A major (A-C#-E)

Once you have practised A major in its three inversions, see if you can switch between A major in its root position and D major in its second inversion by simply moving your third and fifth fingers up two semitones.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Minor chords

Minor chords are the mood-swingers of your chord repertoire, and add depth to your progressions

Minor chords (m) have a near-identical structure to that of their respective major; the only difference being the major third is lowered by one semitone – producing a minor third. Minor chords are renowned for their solemn, melancholy tone – think *Losing My Religion* by REM, or Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 3*. However, most Western music that is written in a major key will include some minor chords to add to the richness of the melody. As we will cover later in 'Chord Progressions', using combinations such as G-D-Em-C is the formula for an overwhelming majority of popular music – take most Beatles hits.

Mastering the use of minor chords will add a beautiful quality to your playing, whatever your mood. To construct a minor chord, first locate the root; E for Em, for example. To identify the minor third count three semitones up from the root; in Em the minor third is G. To complete the triad count a further four semitones up from the major third; in Em the perfect fifth is B. Remember, if a chord does not begin on its root note it is known as an inversion: the first inversion begins on the minor third (in Em, you would play G-E-B); the second inversion begins on the perfect fifth (in Em, you would play B-E-G). When playing minor triads, the common fingering is 5-3-1 in the left hand and 1-3-5 in the right.
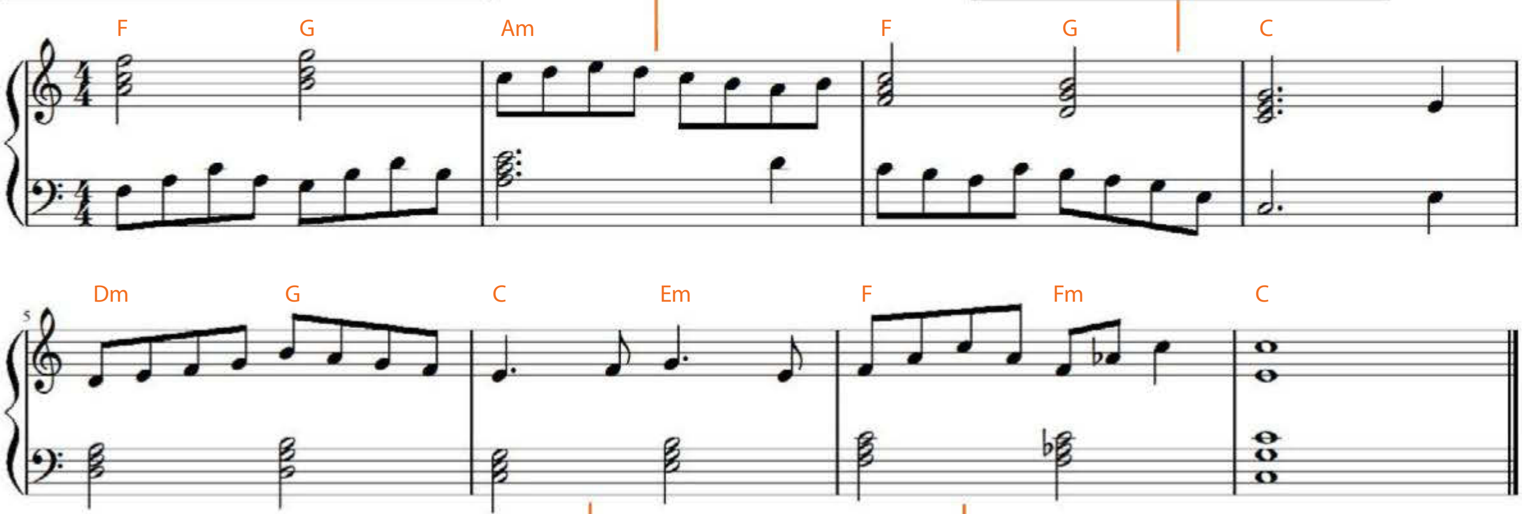
> "Mastering the use of minor chords will add a beautiful quality to your playing, whatever your mood"

Mixing majors and minors

Now you have perfected these four common minor triads, try combining major and minor chords

Bars 1 and 2
In bar one F major and G major, both in their first inversions, are in the right hand. Bar 2 introduces the first minor chord – A minor in its root position

Bars 3 and 4
The chords in bars 3 and 4 are all major. Rarely will a piece be comprised of purely minor chords; variety is important

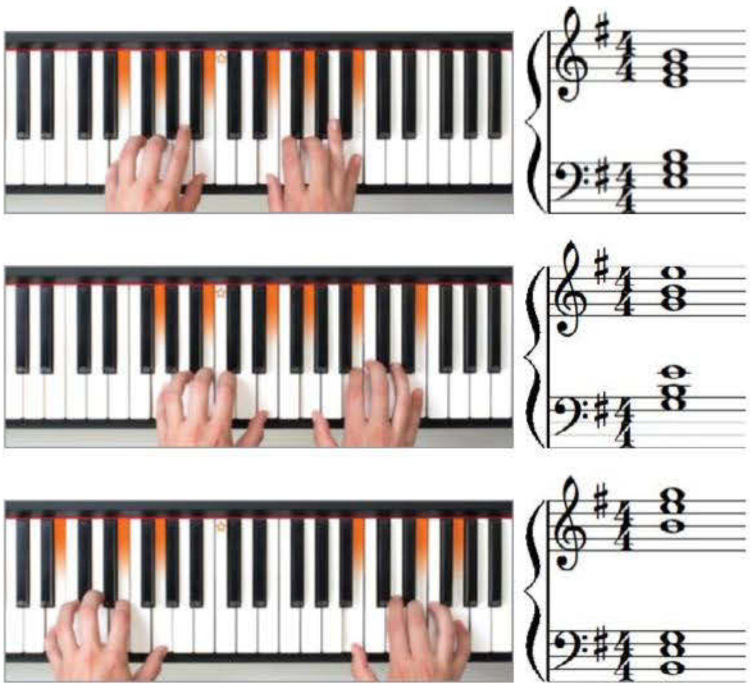


Bars 5 and 6
To move smoothly from D minor to G major, stabilise your fifth finger on the bass note. Similarly, when moving from C Major to E minor, utilise their shared notes

Bars 7 and 8
Moving from a major chord to its minor triad in this way is common at the end of a piece. Simply move your third finger down one semitone

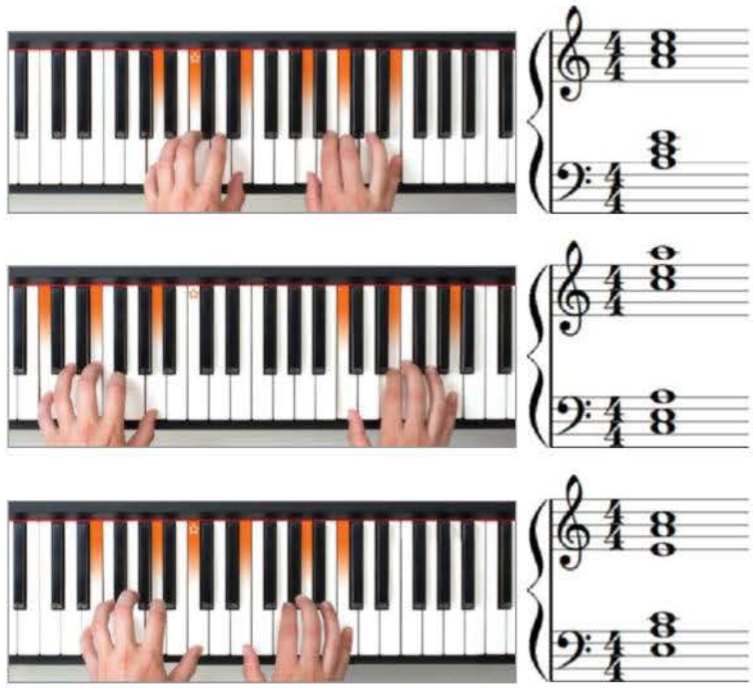
Common minor chords

Here we learn four common minor chords – Em, Am, Dm and Gm – and their inversions



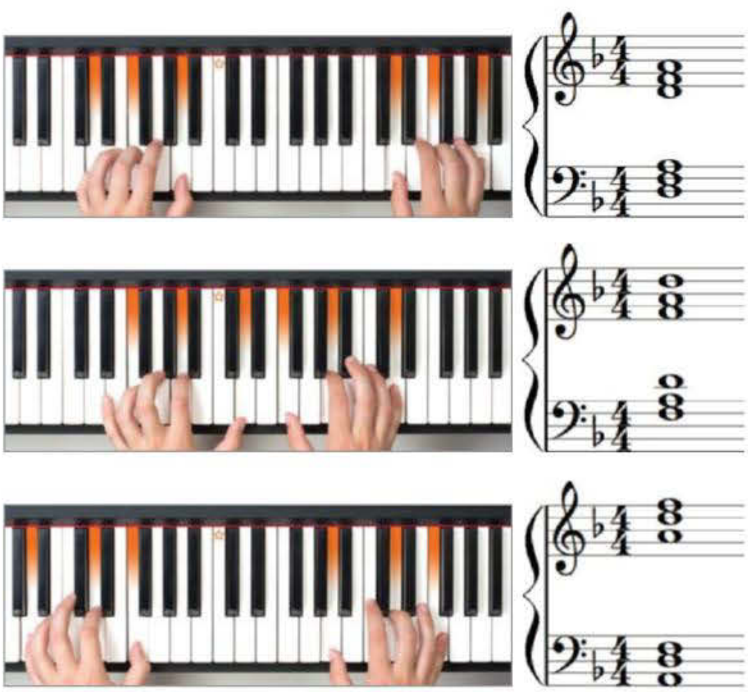
E minor (E-G-B)

Play the chord in its root position with the right hand and then the left. Using the same finger pattern, repeat this step with the first and second inversions. Practise moving through these three positions until you feel confident.



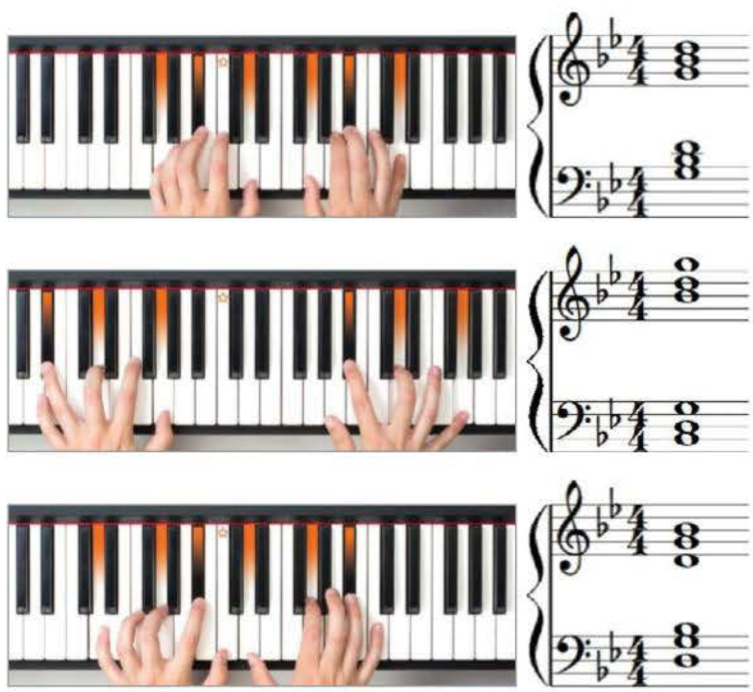
A minor (A-C-E)

As before, play the chord in its root position with the right hand and then the left. Now play the first and second inversions. By now you should feel confident recognising the melancholy sound of the minor chord.



D minor (D-F-A)

Repeat the exercises you have just completed, but this time try mixing up the order of the inversions. In particular, practise moving from second to root position. Practise playing a different inversion in the left hand to that in the right.



G minor (G-Bb-D)

Make yourself confident with this chord using the three exercises you have just completed. To remind yourself of how a minor chord is formed, practise moving from G major to G minor by lowering the third by one semitone.

Suspended chords

Shake things up and add some variation to your chord progressions with suspended chords

The chords that we have examined so far have all involved the third note in the corresponding scale. However, the thing that defines a suspended chord is that it doesn't use the third note at all. In the world of piano compositions, the two most common suspended chords are sus2 and sus4.

In order to play a sus2 chord, you must replace the third from a major or minor chord and instead use the major second – the second note in the chord's corresponding major scale. Using C (C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C) as an example, you would replace the E (the third) in a C major chord with D (the second). So, to play a Csus2 chord, you would play C, D and G at the same time. Note that the root (C) and the 'perfect' fifth (G) remain the same.

To play a sus4 chord, you must again replace the third from a major or minor chord, but this time use the fourth note in the chord's corresponding major scale – this interval between the root note and the fourth is known as a 'perfect fourth'. So if you're playing Csus4, you would play C (the root), F (perfect fourth), and G (perfect fifth). Try alternating between C major, Csus2 and Csus4.
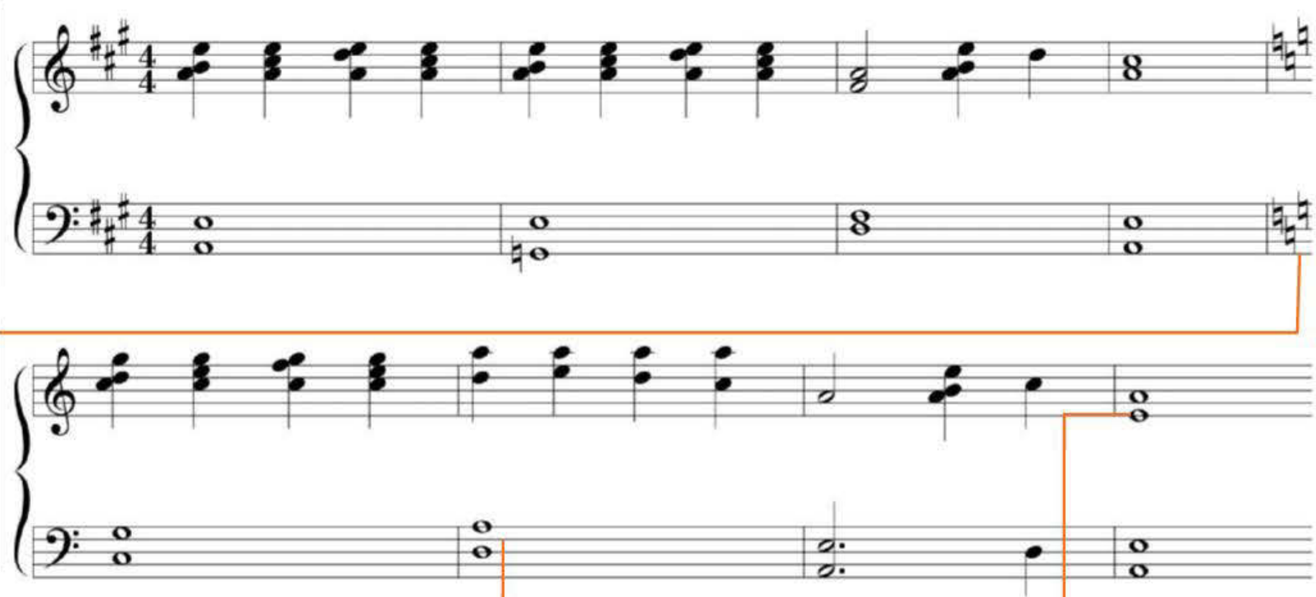
To hear how suspended chords work in pop music, have a listen to Erasure's *A Little Respect*. The keyboard part shifts from a major/minor chord to a sus4 to give the progression a little more variation.

> "In order to play a sus2 chord, you must replace the third from a major or minor chord and instead use the major second"

Putting it into practice

See how a suspended song works

Sus progression
Here we move from Asus2 to A to Asus4 back to A major, and then repeat it for the next bar. It's quite a common progression



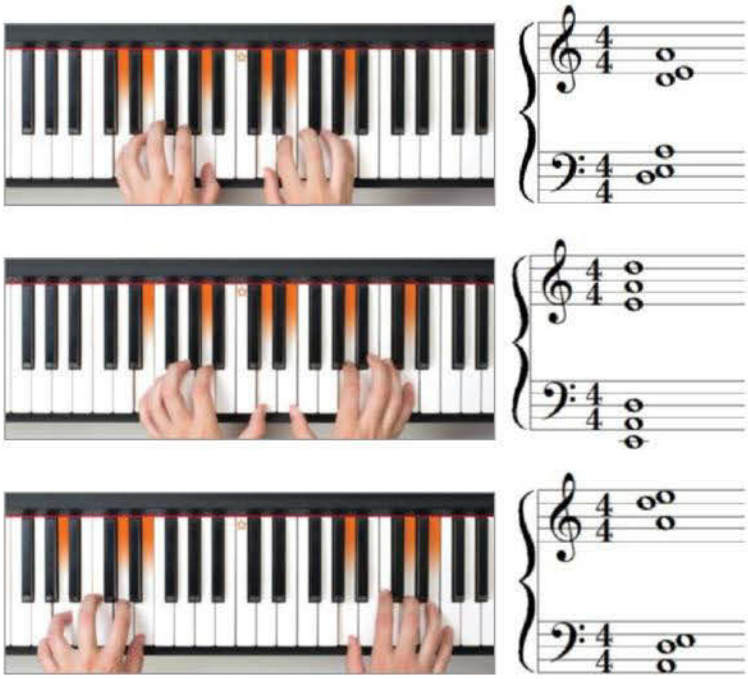
Key change
Make sure you don't miss this key change. We've moved from A major (three sharps) to A minor (no sharps or flats)

Simple left hand
While you're learning suspended chords, it may be best to keep the left hand parts simple – like here

Resolution
Suspended chords aren't the best chords to finish with if you want a resolved ending. We've used A minor to end our piece

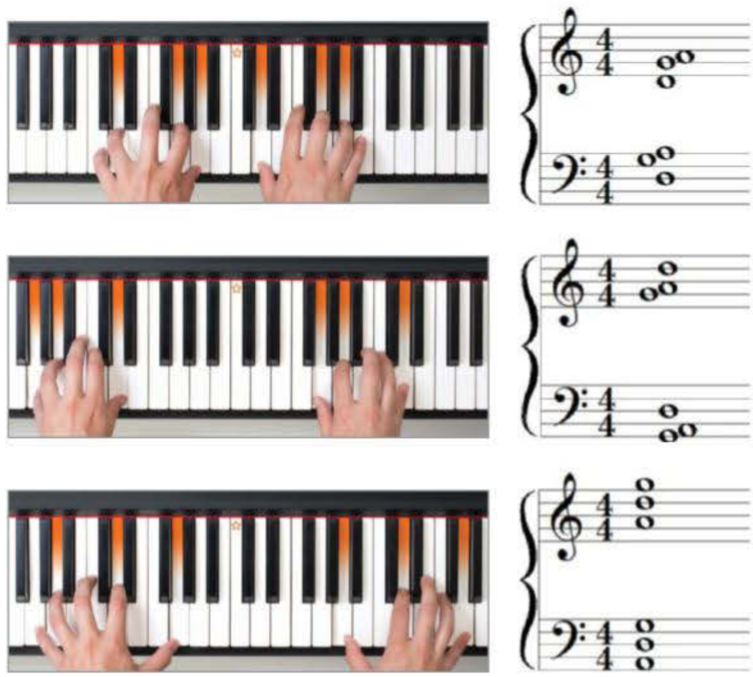
Suspended chords and inversions

Subtly altering major chords



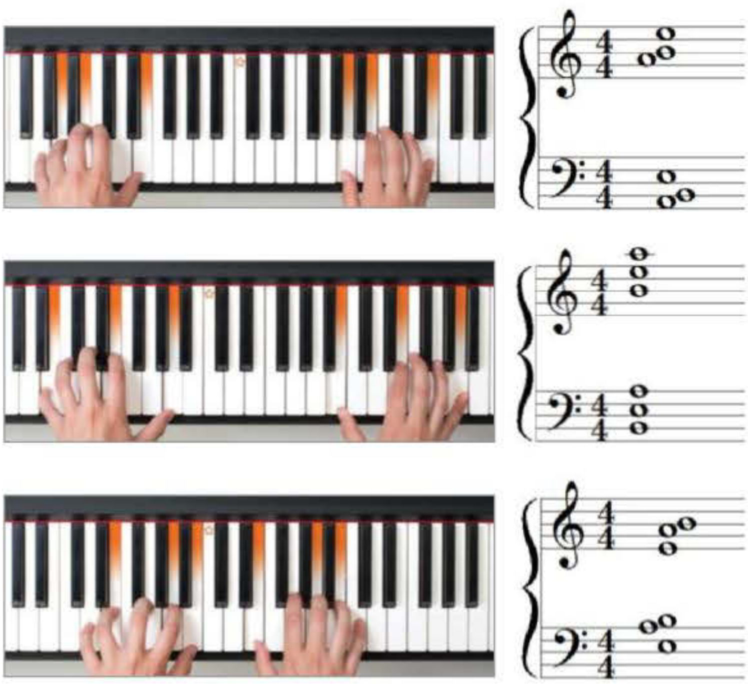
01 Dsus2

In a sus2 chord you replace the third of a major or minor chord with a second, so in D's case you replace the F# with an E. The second inversion is also the root position of Asus4.



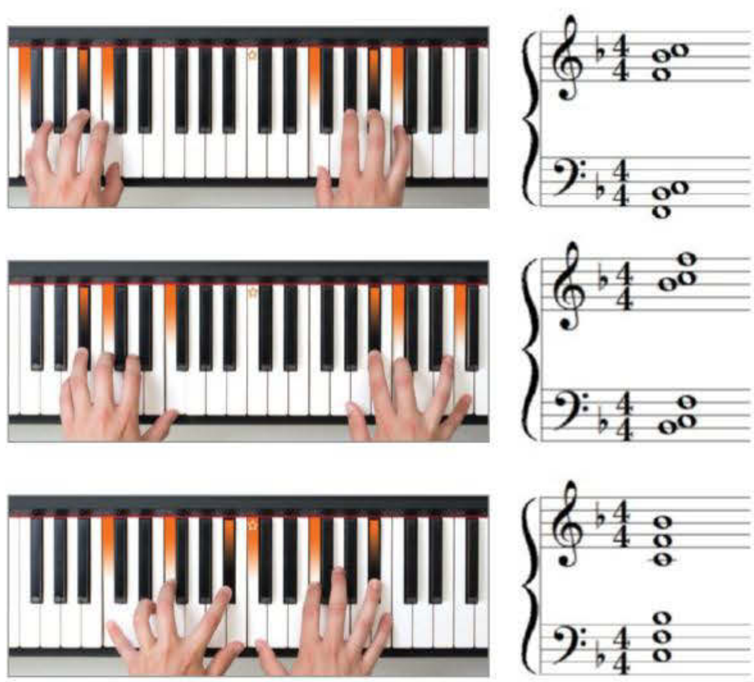
02 Dsus4

To get a sus4 chord we need to change the major or minor chord's third with a perfect fourth. So for D we replace the F# with a G to get a sus4 triad of D, G, and A. You can create a simple melody using E, F# and G while still playing D and A!



03 Asus2

Following the same rules we have applied previously, the C# of the A major triad is replaced with a B natural for the sus2. The second inversion is identical to an Esus4 chord in root position.



04 Fsus4

Proving that suspended chords don't just have to be on the white keys, Fsus4 needs a B♭ replacing the A of its major triad. Its first inversion (B♭, C, F) is the same as B♭sus2 in root position.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Augmented chords

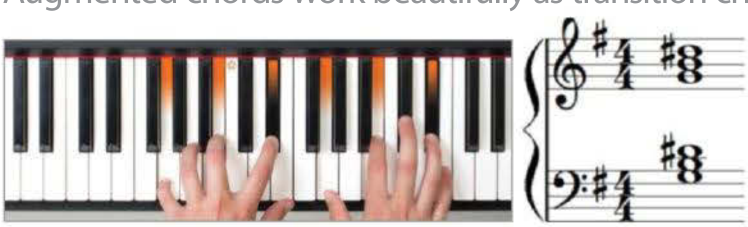
Add a bit of spice to your chord progressions with an augmented chord

Augmented chords can liven up a piece of music, but should be used sparingly. As with the other triads, an augmented chord is formed of a root, a third and a fifth note, but the key difference between an augmented chord and a simple major/minor chord is that each note is a major third (four semitones) apart. For example, where C would be formed of the notes C, E and G, C augmented (notated as C+) would be formed of C, E, G#. The interval between the third and fifth note has been increased (or augmented) by one semitone, thus technically a minor augmented chord cannot exist. At first an augmented chord may sound a little odd, but used as a transition between two chords they can become powerful melodic tools. If you play C in its root position, try moving your fifth finger from G to G# while keeping your thumb and third finger on C and E. Now move from C+ to F in its second inversion (C, F, A). Hear how the dissonance provided by the G# has now created an interesting transition between C and F? We will practise this further in the next section. If the augmented chord does not start on its root note it is called an inversion. G+ in the first inversion would begin on the major third (B), while in the second inversion the chord would begin on the augmented fifth itself (D#). The common fingering used is 5-3-1 in the left hand and 1-3-5 in the right.

> "At first an augmented chord may sound a little odd, but used as a transition between two chords they can become powerful tools"

Using augmented chords

Augmented chords work beautifully as transition chords





G augmented (G-B-D#)

First play the chord in its root position. Remember, an augmented chord is simply the major triad with a raised perfect fifth. Once you are comfortable with the chord in both hands try moving through the first and second inversions.





C augmented as a transition (C-E-G#)

Repeat the exercise with C augmented. Once you feel confident, practise moving between C major and C augmented in the right hand by moving your fifth finger up one semitone. Now try transitioning to F in its second inversion.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Diminished chords

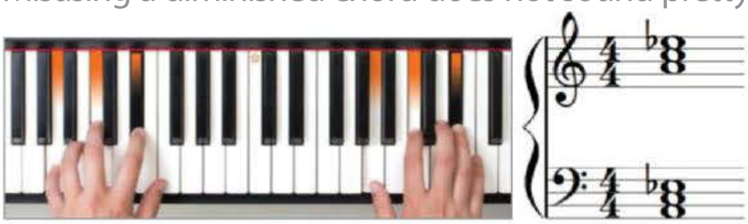
A diminished chord is formed of a stack of minor thirds

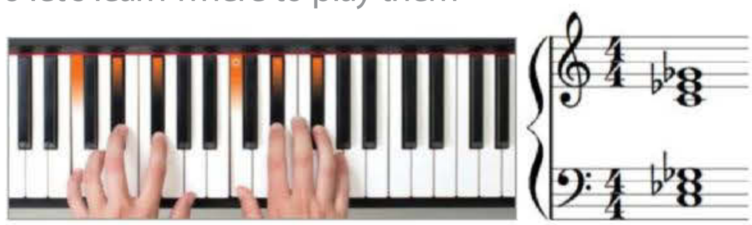
Diminished chords can add a really interesting sound to your playing but need to be used in moderation. If your piece is in a major key, then the diminished chord that occurs naturally will have its root on the seventh note of that scale. In the key of G major for example, the diminished chord would be F#dim. To form this chord, first locate the root note (F#) and count up three semitones to locate the minor third (A). The fifth note lies another minor third up from this note (C). If, however, your piece is in a minor key, the naturally-occurring diminished chord will be built from the second note of that minor scale; in the key of C minor for example, the diminished triad is D♭ dim (D, F and A♭). You will find that the most common way composers incorporate diminished chords into their playing is by using the diminished 7th. This has an identical structure but with a fourth note added on top – this note lies another minor third above the fifth note of the triad. Cdim7 would therefore comprise the notes C, E♭, G♭ and A. When playing seventh chords usually the fingering 1-2-3-5 works best in the right hand and 5-3-2-1 in the left; this is because it is harder to use your fourth finger independently of the third. Diminished sevenths are often used as resolution chords; the best way to understand this is to hear it: Play Cdim7 and practise resolving to G major – sounds pretty jazzy, right?

> "If your piece is in a major key, then the diminished chord that occurs naturally will have its root on the seventh note of that scale"

Using diminished chords

Misusing a diminished chord does not sound pretty, so let's learn where to play them













A diminished (A-C-E♭)

To play the chord in its root position first locate the minor triad (A-C-E). Now lower your fifth finger on the right hand (or your thumb on the left) by one semitone. When you feel comfortable, practise moving between the inversions.

C diminished (C-E♭-G♭)

Repeat the exercise until you feel confident locating the C diminished chord. Now add the seventh (A). C7 in its second inversion moves melodically to G major due to a shared bass and the fall of E♭/C to D/B.

Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Dominant seventh chords

Dominant sevenths, sevenths, major minor sevenths, and all that jazz

A dominant seventh, sometimes called the major minor seventh, is a chord formed of four notes: a root, major third and perfect fifth (collectively a major triad) with an added minor seventh (the seventh tone in the minor scale of the root note). Let us walk through an example here. To play C dominant seventh, noted as C7, first form the major triad (C-E-G). Instead of playing this with the fingering 1-3-5 in the right, or 5-3-1 in the left, you should use 1-2-3 or 5-3-2 respectively. This then leaves your thumb or fifth finger free to add the minor seventh to the chord – remember that this note will be three semitones above the perfect fifth, in this particular example, B♭.

As there are four notes a seventh chord will have a third inversion beginning on the minor 7th itself; C7 in the third inversion would be B♭-C-E-G. The seventh chord is commonly found in jazz and blues music, as well as traditional rock 'n' roll; think *Hound Dog* by Elvis Presley or *So What* by Miles Davis. It is often used as a resolving chord. This means that played on its own it may sound unfinished, whereas followed by a particular major chord it can make an interesting ending to a bar or piece. The chord that you have just learnt, C7, resolves to F because C is the fifth tone of the F major scale. This trick can be used with any two chords so long as the root note of the seventh is the perfect fifth of the major chord.
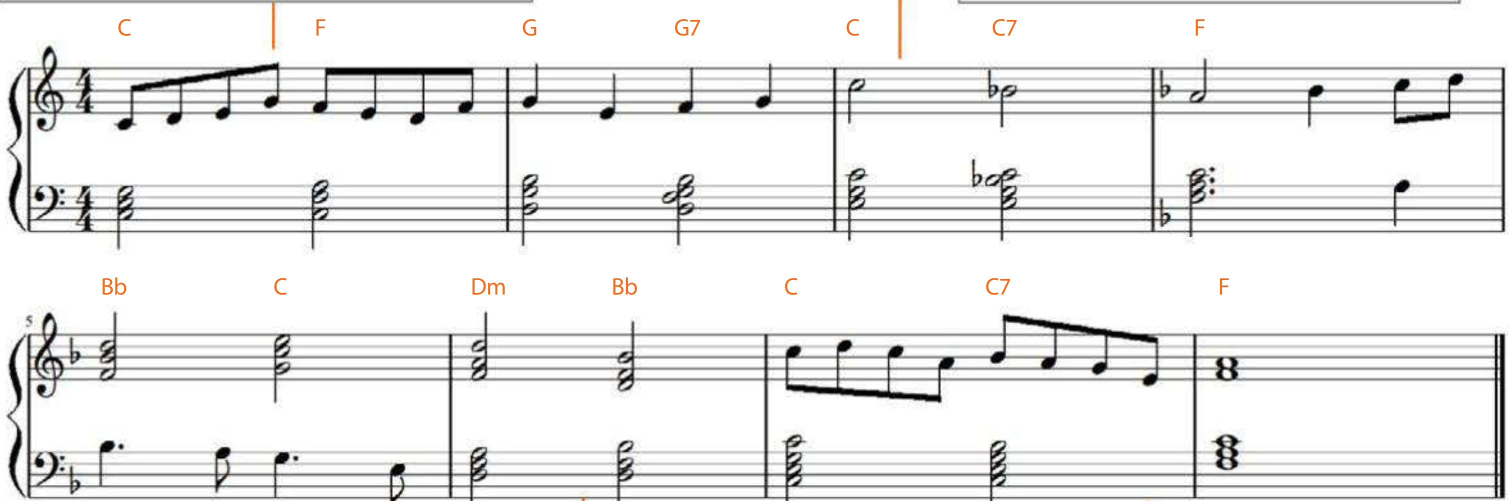
> "On its own it may sound unfinished, but follow it with a major chord for an interesting ending"

Playing dominant sevenths

See how seventh chords work

Bars 1 and 2
Here you must shift between G major and G7 both in their second inversions. Use 5-2-1 to play the former so you can simply add the seventh with your third finger

Bars 5 and 6
An example of how a dominant seventh is used to change key. The reason this works is because the seventh of C major (B♭) is the fourth of F major

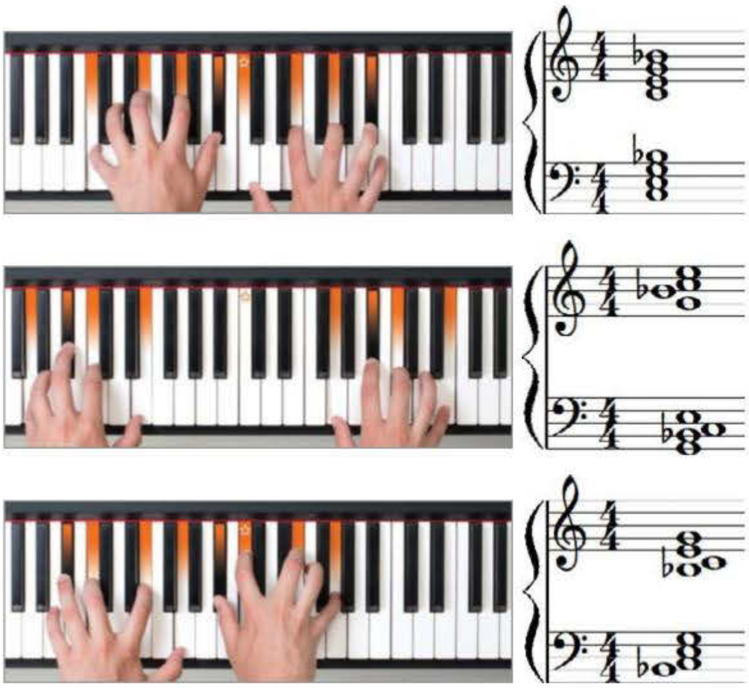


Bars 5 and 6
No sevenths appear in this section as we have just shifted key. Experiment with what fingers you use – it doesn't have to be strictly 1-3-5 for a triad

Bars 7 and 8
Sevenths are commonly used to end a piece. Maintain the structure of the triad in the left hand and just shift your thumb to smoothly move from C to C7

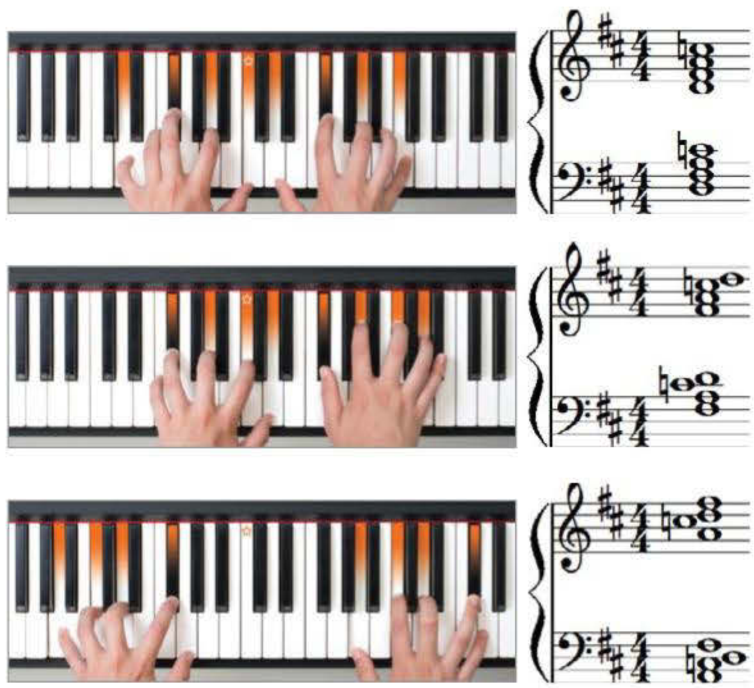
Playing dominant sevenths

Here we will learn four common dominant seventh chords



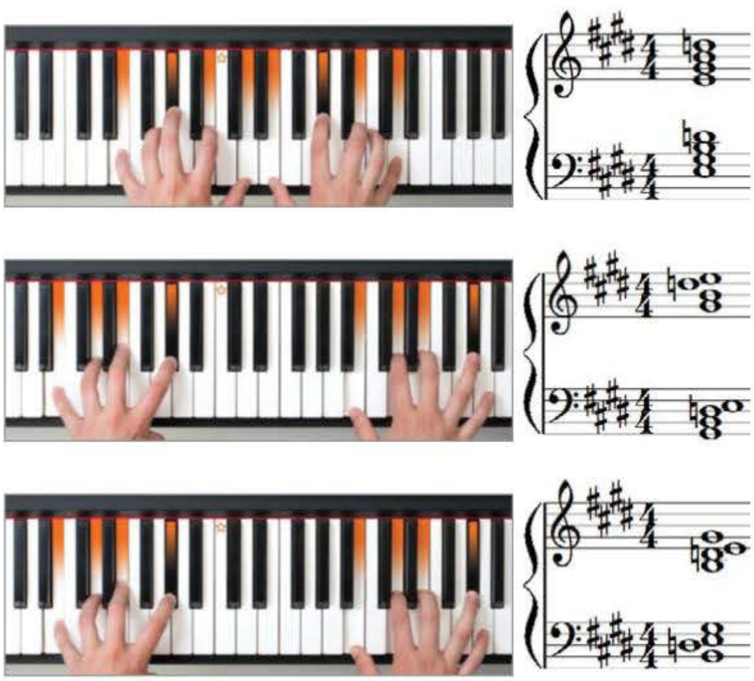
C7 (C-E-G-B♭)

Begin in the root position using the fingering 1-2-3-4 in the right hand and 5-3-2-1 in the left. You only have the notation for the root, second and third inversions. It's up to you to identify the first inversion, starting on the major third.



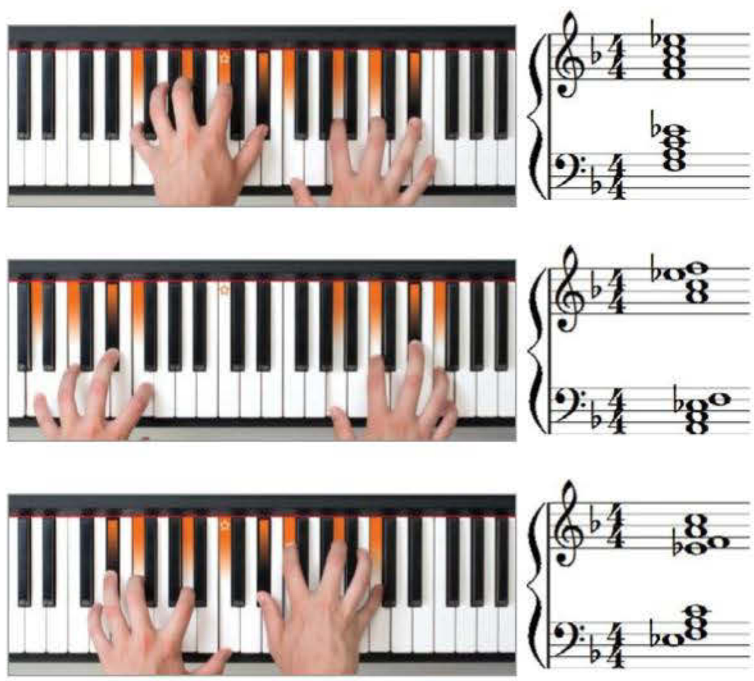
D7 (D-F#-A-C)

As before, you have only been given three inversions: the root, first and second. Use your knowledge of the sound and structure of this chord to identify the third inversion. Now practise moving between the four inversions.



E7 (E-G#-B-D)

By now you should feel confident identifying the missing inversion; in this example you must work out the third inversion. You may find it easiest to always locate the major triad first and then identify the seventh.



F7 (F-A-C-E♭)

A silly trick to remember this chord: it has a flat face (F-A-C-E♭). Get it? Terrible joke, but little things like this can really help when you are getting used to a new chord group.

Major seventh chords

Used correctly these will add a beautiful quality to your playing

The major seventh, notated as Maj7 (or M7), is formed of four notes: a root, major third, perfect fifth and a major seventh note. This is why you may also hear it referred to as the major major seventh. It is the most dissonant of the seventh chords, meaning it can sound inharmonious if used out of place. However many composers favour the major seventh chord for its dreamy, airy sound – think of the first line of *Close To You* by the Carpenters.

Subtle dissimilarities in how this family of chords are noted can produce very different harmonies. In particular, be careful to not confuse M7 with m7 (a minor seventh) as both the third and seventh notes are altered. Let us work through a simple example of a Maj7 chord: To play CMaj7 first form the major triad (C-E-G). As with other seventh chords, instead of playing this with the fingering 1-3-5 in the right or 5-3-1 in the left, try to use 1-2-3 or 5-3-2 respectively. This leaves your fifth finger or thumb free to add the major seventh to the chord – this note will be four semitones above the perfect fifth, in this example, B. You can locate the major seventh by counting one semitone down from the root note. As there are four notes, a seventh chord will have a third inversion beginning on the major 7th itself; CMaj7 in the third inversion would be B-C-E-G. M7 chords are normally used as transition rather than resolution chords.

> "Many composers favour the major seventh chord for its dreamy, airy sound"

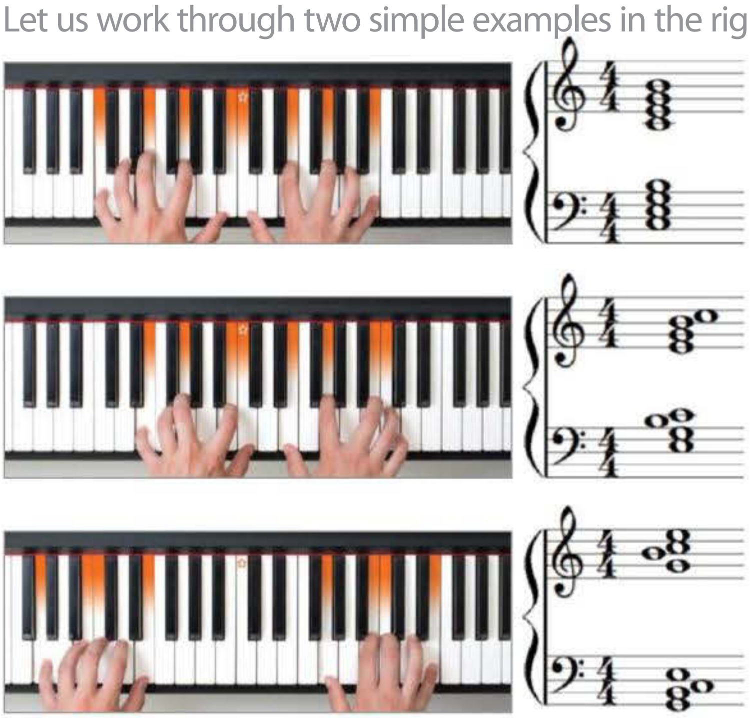
Top tip

Use both hands to form the chord

While using four fingers on one hand to form a seventh chord is the best way to play one, you can try playing two notes of the chord with your left hand, and then another two with the right hand. They don't even have to be of the same octave. Try playing C and G with the left hand and then E and B with the right.

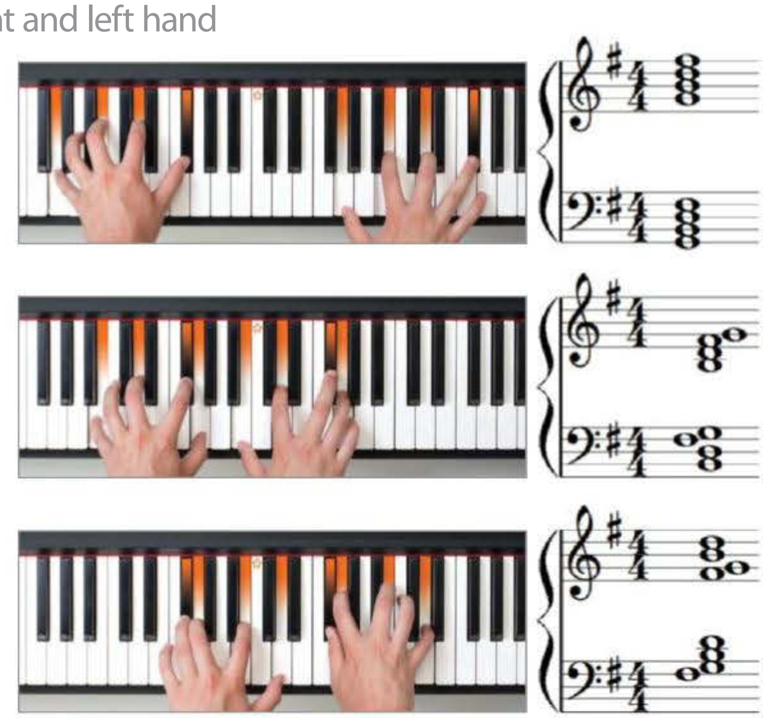
Playing Maj7 chords

Let us work through two simple examples in the right and left hand



CMaj7 (C-E-G-B)

Using the fingering 1-2-3-5 in the right hand and 5-3-2-1 in the left, practise locating the chord in its root position. Keeping the same fingering, move to the first inversion and then the second before returning to the root.



GMaj7 (G-B-D-F#)

Here you have only been given the notation for the root, first and third inversions – the third starting on the seventh itself. It's up to you to identify the second inversion – remember to start on the perfect fifth.

Minor seventh chords

Minor sevenths can transform a plain minor triad

The minor seventh, notated as m7, lifts the mood of a minor triad and stops it from sounding quite so glum. Unlike a major seventh chord, a minor seventh enables you to add the seventh note without clashing with the overlying melody, allowing you to be more experimental. However, do be cautious not to confuse it with a 7 or M7 chord as this produces the wrong kind of experimental sound!

The minor seventh chord is formed of four notes: a root, minor third and perfect fifth (collectively a minor triad) with the addition of a seventh note (the seventh tone in the minor scale of the root note). This is why it may sometimes called the minor minor seventh. Here is a worked through example: to play Dm7 first find the minor triad (D-F-A). Remember to leave your fifth finger or thumb free to complete the chord. The minor seventh will be three semitones above the perfect fifth, in this example, C. Alternatively count two semitones down from the root note to locate the minor seventh. Unlike a simple minor triad a minor seventh will have a third inversion beginning on the 7th itself; Dm7 in the third inversion would be C-D-F-A. When playing the third inversion in the left hand you may find it easier to use the fingering 5-4-2-1. Similarly the fingering 1-2-4-5 is often more comfortable when playing the first inversion in the right hand.

> "Minor seventh lets you add the seventh note without clashing with the melody"

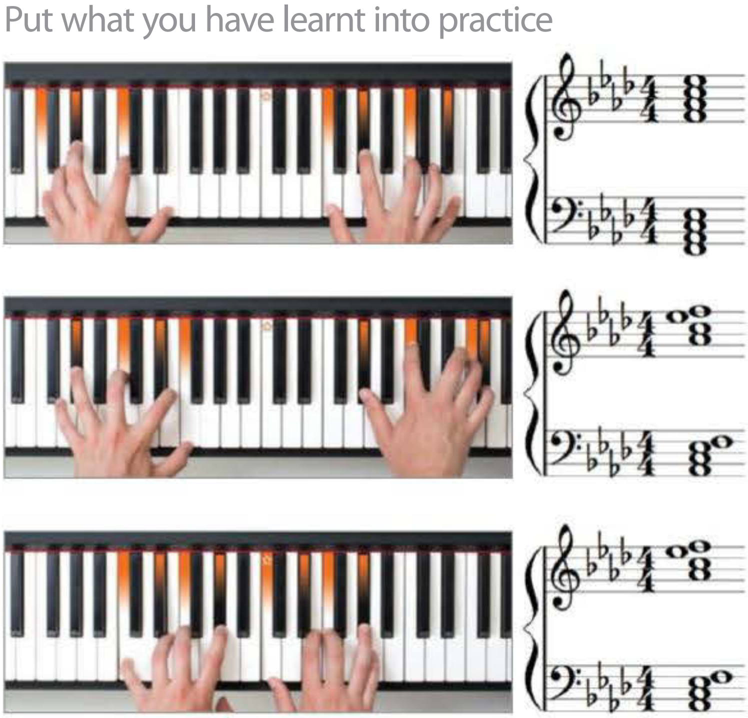
Top tip

Minor major seventh chords

There is one type of chord we haven't covered here: the minor major seventh (mM7). To play an mM7 chord, you must flatten the third (like a minor triad) but not the seventh. So, for CmM7, you play C-Eb-G-B. The latter three notes are actually an Eb augmented triad, which gives the mM7 a mysterious feel.

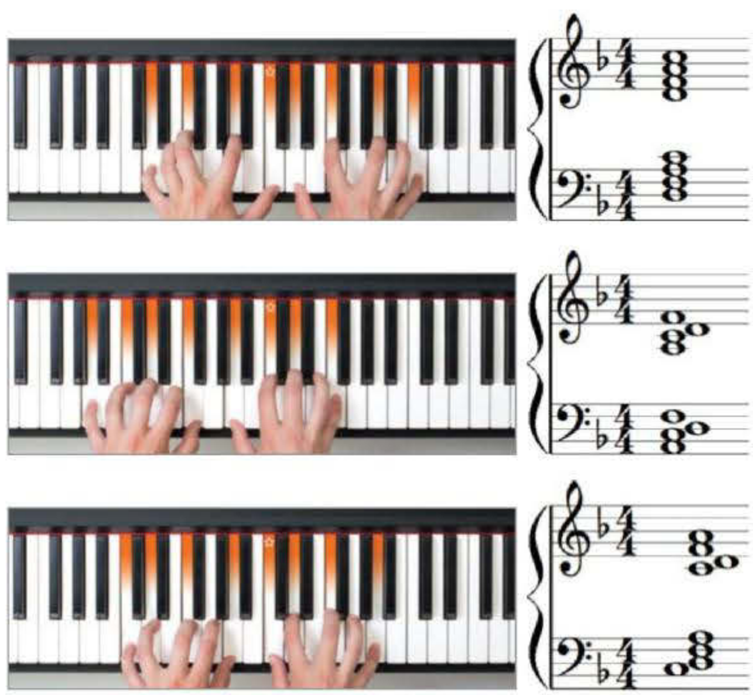
Playing minor seventh chords

Put what you have learnt into practice



Fm7 (F-A♭-C-E♭)

Practise locating the chord in its root position using the fingering 1-2-3-5 in the right hand and 5-3-2-1 in the left. Move to the first inversion and then the second, repeating until you feel comfortable with the sound and structure.



Dm7 (D-F-A-C)

Here you have only been given the notation for the root, second and third inversions – the third starting on the seventh itself. It's up to you to identify the first inversion – remember to start on the minor third.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Use chord progressions

"It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift"

You may recognise the above as lyrics from Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*; what you may not know is that the words describe a useful chord progression. A chord progression describes shifting through a series of chords within a key signature. Particular sequences may also be used to move to a new key. As you know there are seven possible roots for chords within a major or minor scale, and with regards to progressions these seven notes are labelled with Roman numerals; that way you can apply the method to any key signature. In C major, for example, chord I would be C, II would be D and so on. If the chord is not capitalised then it is a minor chord; for example vi in C major would be the chord Am. If the chord is a seventh, augmented or diminished they will be labelled accordingly; V7 in C major would be the chord G7. A cadence is the name given to the progression between two chords. Most pieces finish by moving from the fifth (V) to the tonic chord (I) to give a finale effect. This is called a perfect cadence. An imperfect cadence is used where a break is needed, but the piece is not finished. Common examples include I-V, ii-V and IV-V. Returning to the *Hallelujah* example, in C major the chord progression would be: C, F, G, Am and F.

"Chord progression describes shifting through chords within a key signature"

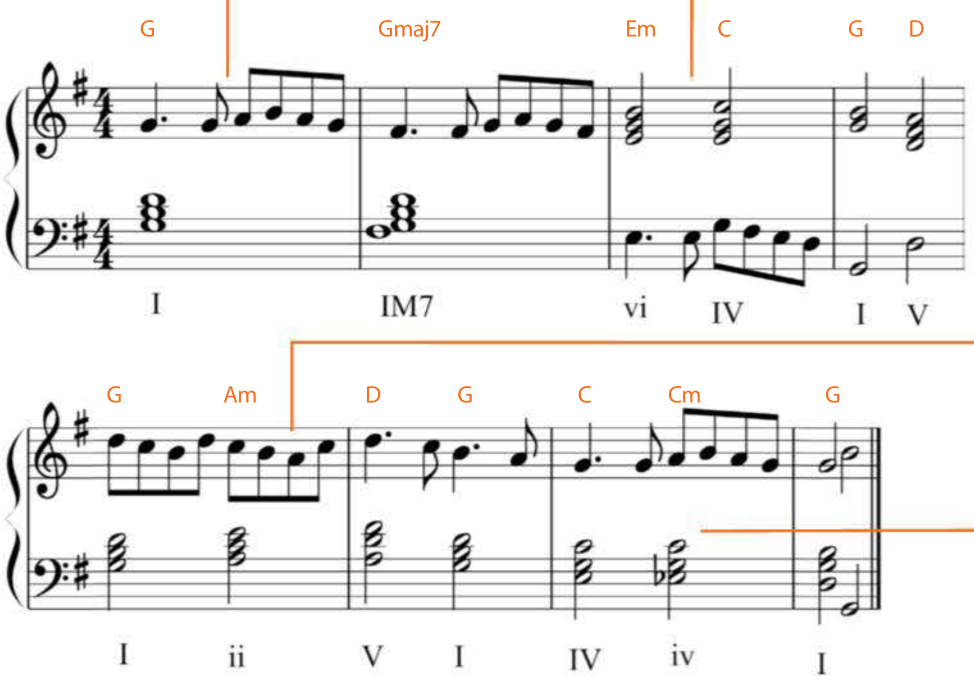
Bringing it all together

Right and left hand, majors and minors, sevenths, inversions and progressions

Top tip
You don't have to use the whole chord
Sometimes using all the notes of a chord may sound too heavy, particularly if the accompanying melody is quite busy – you don't want to do make your piece sound 'muddy' and confused. Experiment with your chords and try using purely the first and fifth notes of a triad, or maybe just the first and third.

Bars 1 and 2
Always look ahead when you are playing! Play the G chord in bar one using the fingering 3-2-1, that way your fourth finger can add the F# in bar 2

Bars 3 and 4
Your fifth finger in the left should be free to play the E note. Meanwhile your right hand takes over with the chords: supposedly the only four needed in popular music



Bars 5 and 6
The chords return to the left hand. Note how the inversions create a smooth movement in the bass that would not occur if we only used root position chords

Bars 7 and 8
Here's another chance to practise the plagal cadence. As the third note of the triad is also the bass it puts an emphasis on the switch between the major and minor chord

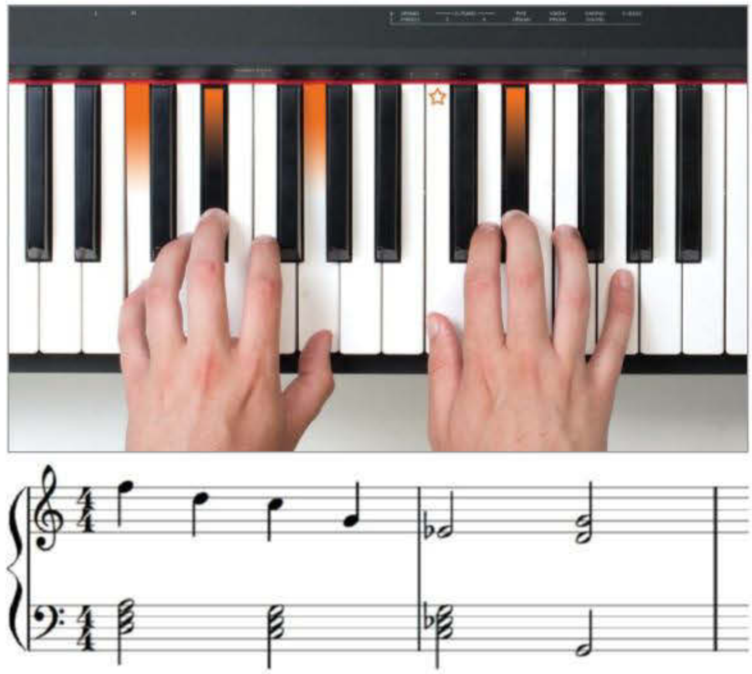
Common chord progressions

Here we learn to play through some popular chord progressions



IV-V-I

This is probably the most common use of the perfect cadence. In this example we are shifting between F-G-C. If the piece were in G major we would be using the chords C-D-G.
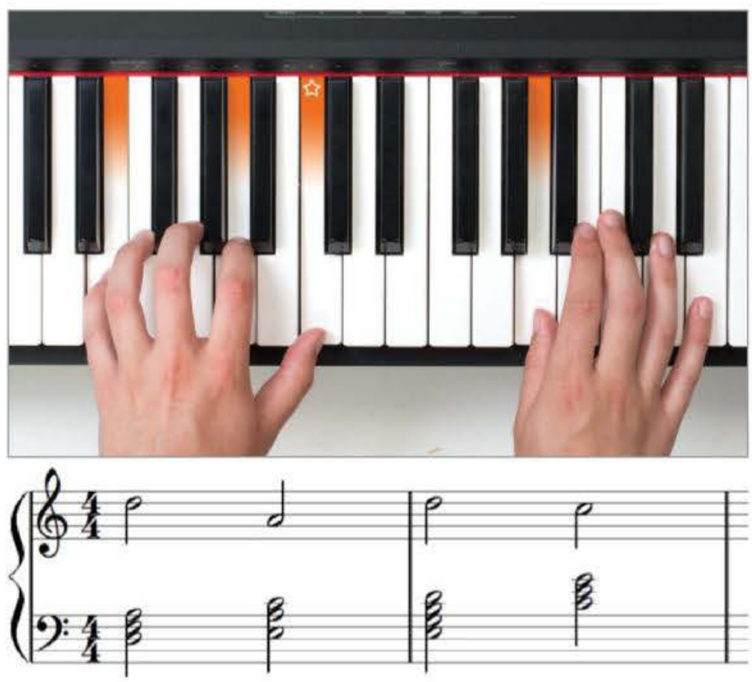


V-IV-iv-I

This progression sounds beautiful as an ending to a piece. In musical theory moving from the fourth to the root chord is called a plagal cadence. In this example, in G major, we move through the chords D-C-Cm-G.



I-V-vi-IV

Have you ever heard the phrase 'all pop songs contain the same four chords'? Well these are the chords: the root, fifth, fourth and minor second, in any order. In this example in C major the chords are therefore C-G-Dm-F.



ii-vi-V7-I

This example shows how a progression can be used to switch from a minor to a major key, and also how a seventh can be used to resolve a cadence. The chords here are Dm-Am-G7-C.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Left-hand patterns

Discover some of the techniques for using your left hand to support the melody

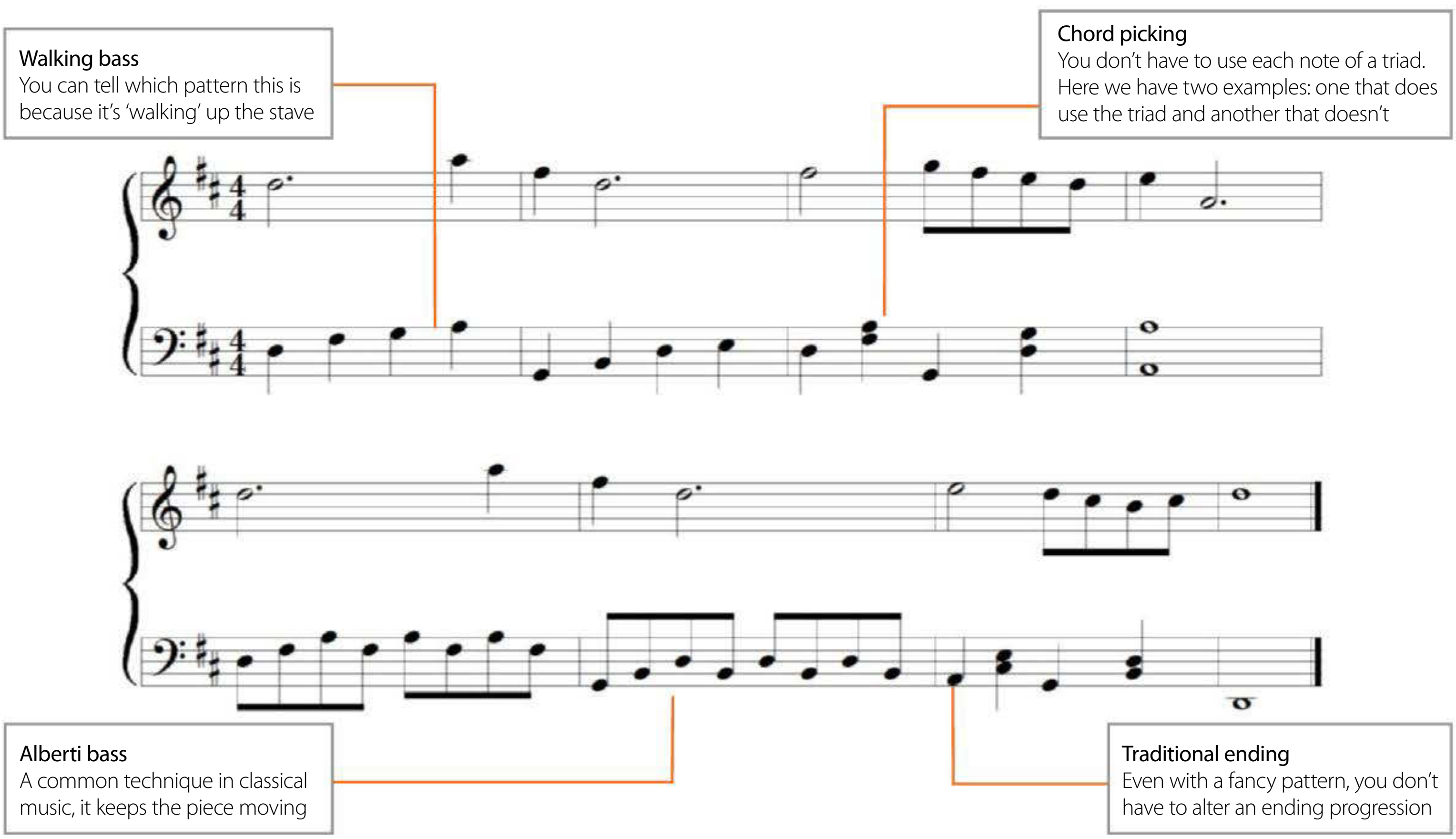
When you're playing piano, your right hand will likely be playing the melodies. However, this doesn't mean you should neglect your left hand. It doesn't matter if your right hand can play incredibly intricate passages over and over again; if your left hand can't back it up with solid accompanying patterns then you may struggle to master the piano. It doesn't just have to accompany, as a left hand melody can provide vital variety and possibly a response to the right hand.

Not only are the patterns that we look at in this tutorial valuable for improving left-hand dexterity, they can also be used when you only have the chords of the piece to go by – you may have found the chords to your favourite pop song and want to play along with it, for example. Don't feel restricted to just these patterns, either. Part of the fun of music is how easy it is to experiment with different patterns – rather than just playing root chords, try using inversions; instead of using an ascending walking bass, try descending instead. While you're practising these patterns, start off with just the left hand, and then try adding a basic right-hand melody over the top. As your confidence grows, so will your co-ordination. Ideally, you will want your left hand to be able to play whatever your right hand can.

> "It doesn't matter if your right hand can play intricate passages; if your left hand can't back it up then you may struggle to master the piano"

Putting it into practice

Different patterns in practice



Different patterns

Get your left hand moving!



01 Octaves

Okay, so they're a little boring, but it's good to get your palm stretching across 12 semitones and there's nothing wrong keeping it simple! Just make sure you don't accidentally miss one note by a key.



02 Walking bass

If you want a bassline with a bit more feeling, try a walking bassline. Aim to create a tune that 'walks' up and then down. The flattened seventh here (the C natural) add a bluesy feel to this line.



03 Chord picking

For something a bit different, try chord picking. It's popular in country and western music – especially if you use staccato note on beats two and four. Play the root note then the third and fifth simultaneously after it.



04 Alberti bass

An ideal way to keep your tune flowing and your fingers nimble, Alberti bass is commonly found in classical pieces. Try accompanying this pattern with a simple melody made up of any notes in the D major scale.

Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Learn arpeggios

Break up chords to make your music flow better, with the help of this valuable technique

We've already learnt about the main chords and progressions you can use to enhance your music, but it's also possible to break chords up to create arpeggios. Rather than playing three notes at the same time, you can play them in sequence, one after the other, often ascending and descending. You'll find that arpeggios are useful tools that enable you to keep your music flowing, no matter which hand is playing them.

So, for example, if you were to play a C major chord, the normal route would be to play C (the root), E (the third note in the C major scale) and G (the fifth note in the scale) at the same time. However, if you wanted to play a C major arpeggio you would play the C, then the E, then the G, then the C above G (ie the C an octave above your starting note), then back down to G, E, and finally the original C.

An arpeggio isn't just limited to this structure, however, nor is it limited to just major chords. You could play a C minor arpeggio by just playing C, Eb, and G one after another without descending. To hear how a three-note minor arpeggio like this sounds in music, listen to the opening of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Now imagine how different it would sound if you were to replace its arpeggios with chords.

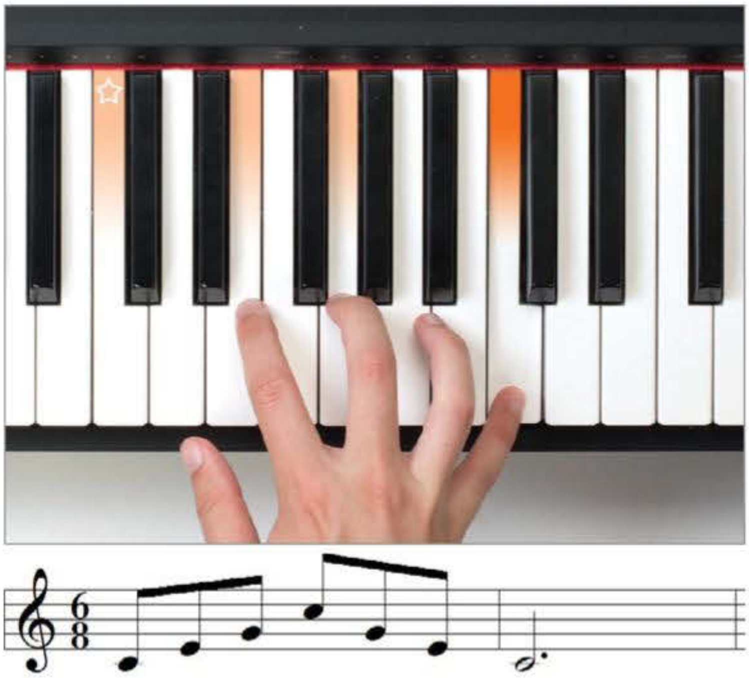
> "Arpeggios are useful tools that enable you to keep your music flowing, no matter which hand is playing them"

Playing an arpeggio Finger positions and more



Right-hand arpeggios

How to play some common arpeggios



01 C major arpeggio

The notes in the C major arpeggio are C, E and G. Play Middle C with your thumb, then the E with your index finger and G with your middle finger. This frees the little finger to stretch to the higher C should you wish to play it.



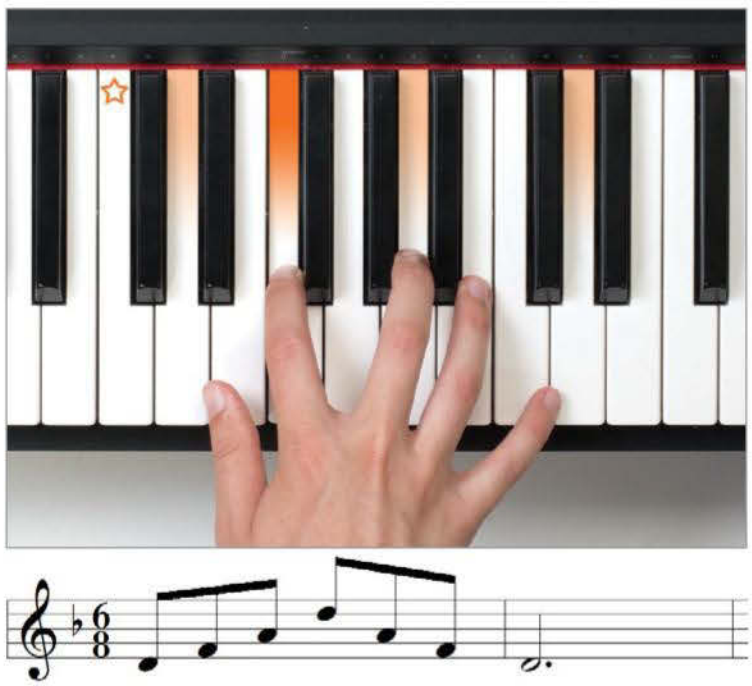
02 D major arpeggio

You'll need to play D, F# and A in sequence to play a basic D-major arpeggio. Again, thumb on the root, index finger on the F#, and middle finger on the A. You shouldn't need to move your hand too much to reach the top D.



03 A minor arpeggio

Like C major, A minor doesn't have sharps or flats to worry about. Use the same finger pattern as the previous arpeggios – don't be afraid to leave the keys if your hands are struggling to reach the octave.



04 D minor arpeggio

Although the D minor key carries a B flat, you do not need to worry about playing it when playing a D minor arpeggio. The root, minor third, and fifth notes in D minor are D, F, and A, so play those one after the other.

The next step

Practise, record and continue to improve with our in-depth tutorials that will take your playing to the next level



Give it a try

Look out for this logo on each page, as it means that an audio and/or video file is available online to help you master a certain technique.

“There’s nothing like putting a song of your own together to really help you figure out how to get the most from your instrument”



Get to grips with recording

Start recording your very first masterpiece with an Apple Mac, iPhone or iPad

There are many reasons why people want to make recordings of themselves singing or playing a musical instrument.

Some use recording as a method of becoming a better musician – they play their recordings back and hear the mistakes they're making – while others want to record songs that they have written themselves. Whatever your recording goals or aspirations, we're here to show you how to take your first steps into the world of recording.

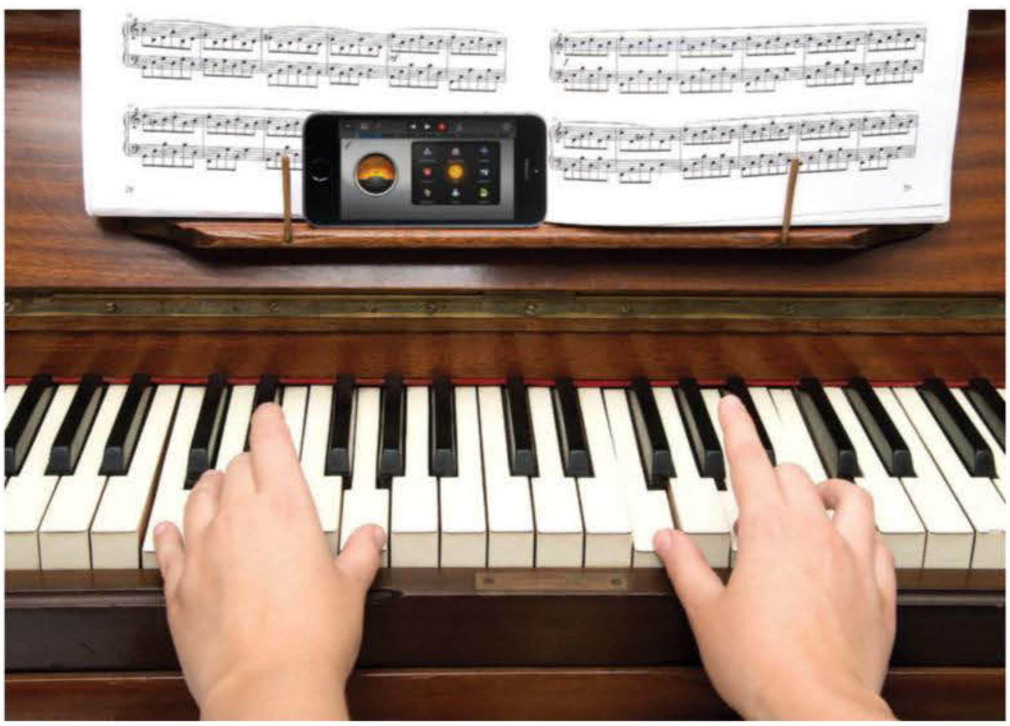
The great thing about technological developments is that there are a number of ways to record music – from using your Mac to even using your iPhone. Gone are the days of fumbling around in your bag for a notepad and pen to scribble down your musical ideas – just grab your iPhone or iPad and hit Record. The tutorials that follow this one will cover the different methods of recording piano with different devices.

Realistically, you should open up your Mac if you want to record the next symphony; but if you're looking to find your feet, look no further than your smartphone or tablet.

When it comes to buying equipment, you should decide whether recording is just a hobby or a career, and spend less or more money based on these expectations. Make sure you don't splash the cash on high-end equipment when you just want to record rough ideas. We will take you through some of the equipment solutions available for all levels of recording.

Before you even sit down at the piano, read on for some handy general tips on recording.

"You should decide whether recording is just a hobby or a career"



Top tips for recording piano

01 Be consistent
For the best recording experience, use the same software. GarageBand is available on Mac and iOS, meaning that you have seamless integration of your projects regardless of where you're working.

02 Make your voice heard
Don't want to carry around any additional equipment? Going to record on an acoustic piano? Don't panic – GarageBand has a handy Audio Recorder which utilises your device's built-in mic.



03 Stay in tune
Make sure your piano is in tune. If you're using a digital piano you'll be fine, but there aren't too many things that sound worse than an out-of-tune acoustic piano.

04 Become a team player
Use GarageBand for Mac to play along with backing tracks. This will not only improve your technique, but will help you get used to playing with a band.

05 Start with a Mac
If you're a new pianist, gain confidence with GarageBand on Mac before recording piano with your iPhone or iPad – you can't remove mistakes from tracks after recording with GarageBand for iOS.



Record piano with a Mac

01 Stay in time

It's important to maintain a steady tempo. Most music-recording software packages for Mac will have a Metronome feature – use this to improve your time-keeping.



02 Multi-take



Recording software such as GarageBand offers you the ability to record several takes of your piano playing on a loop, giving you the power to pick the best-sounding take!

03 Keep it clean



Don't worry too much about getting your sound right before you begin recording – you can add lots of authentic effects and post-recording processing once you have nailed that difficult section.

04 Select a location

If you're using your Mac's on-board mic to record acoustic piano, choose your location carefully. Smaller rooms work best for a clean, interference-free recording, whereas bigger rooms add natural reverb.



05 Crank it up to… 7

Don't be tempted to record at maximum volume. If your recording input level is too high, it will result in distortion – not a desired effect for a pianist.



Record piano with an iPhone

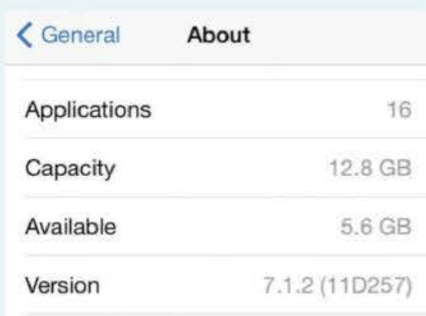
01 Get connected

Make sure your piano-recording hardware (you'll need some to connect) has a headphone connection on it, otherwise you'll be playing piano in silence! A great choice of kit is IK Multimedia's iRig MIDI adaptor.



02 Save some space

Recording piano onto your iPhone can take up a large amount of iPhone storage – free up some space before you begin recording, otherwise you could end up running out mid-recording.



03 Keep your distance

When recording acoustic piano with your iPhone's built-in mic, enure you are seated at least 15cm away from the iPhone, otherwise you will end up with a bass-heavy recording.

04 Know your limits

Want to create a polished-sounding recording? Use your iPhone to solely record your piano then export to software on your Mac, such as AmpliTube or GarageBand, to mix your recordings.



05 Use as a toolbox

There are plenty of apps out there which offer handy piano tools in one app, such as a chord book and metronome, saving you space in your kit bag.

"Recording piano onto your iPhone can take up a large amount of iPhone storage"

Play through a computer

Hook up to a PC or Mac to access millions of new sounds

If you have a keyboard or digital piano – basically any non-acoustic piano – you may be able to hook your device up to a desktop computer to record, edit and generally just mess around. If your only option is an acoustic piano, then you will still be able to record on your computer, but you won't have the same degree of control over sound.

To hook your keyboard up to a computer you either need a USB cable (one may have been supplied when you bought your keyboard) or a USB cable, two MIDI cables and a MIDI-to-USB adapter. To find out which you need, check the back of your keyboard or digital piano. If USB or MIDI inputs are available they should be clearly labelled on your device. If you have an older model, you're probably going to need the MIDI cables.

The good news is that none of these accessories are particularly expensive – you can get USB and MIDI cables for less than £5 and an adapter for around £10. When you're ready, plug either the MIDI or USB cable into your keyboard, and the other end into your computer.

To start playing piano through your computer, you will need to use a digital audio workstation (DAW). If you're using a Mac, you'll be pleased to know that one comes free with it! GarageBand is part of Apple's iLife suite and is a surprisingly sophisticated piece of software. Turn to page 106 for a more in-depth explanation and a tutorial on its features. If you find GarageBand isn't high-end enough for you or you outgrow it, you could try Logic Pro, which is also exclusive to Macs. It isn't cheap, however. A digital copy from the Mac App Store will set you back £139.99/$199.99.

You have more options if you own a PC, but none that are built in to the operating system. Check the internet to find the best DAWs around – you may even find some fantastic options for free, but many paid-for alternatives will still offer a free trial.

There are many advantages of playing your piano through a computer. Although you are unlikely to beat the sound of an acoustic piano, you can use different samples to vary your sound. Also, you may be able to export your compositions as sheet music, saving a lot of time and effort.

> "There are many advantages to playing your piano through a computer; you can use samples and also export compositions as sheet music"

Connect to a computer

Here's how to hook up



01 Plug into the keyboard

Grab your cable and then hunt down the input on your keyboard – you'll probably find that it's at the back or on the side. Depending on what cable your keyboard supports, you're either looking for a single USB B-type port (shown above) or two MIDI ones.



02 Plug into the computer

Once the cable is plugged into your keyboard, connect the other end into the computer. You will need to find a spare USB port. Your computer may have several. If you have a MIDI connection, you will have to connect both MIDI cables into the USB adapter first.

Different connections Hooking up your keyboard

Top tip

Demos and trials

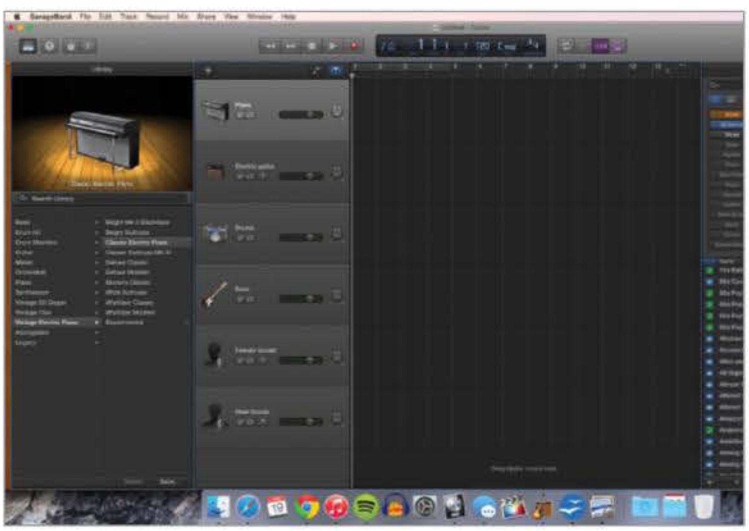
Many premium digital audio workstations are extremely expensive (sometimes upwards of £400/$500), so if the one that you're interested in offers a free trial or demo, make sure you check it out!



Digital audio workstation
You will need a DAW to record and edit music. This one here is Logic Pro, only available on Mac

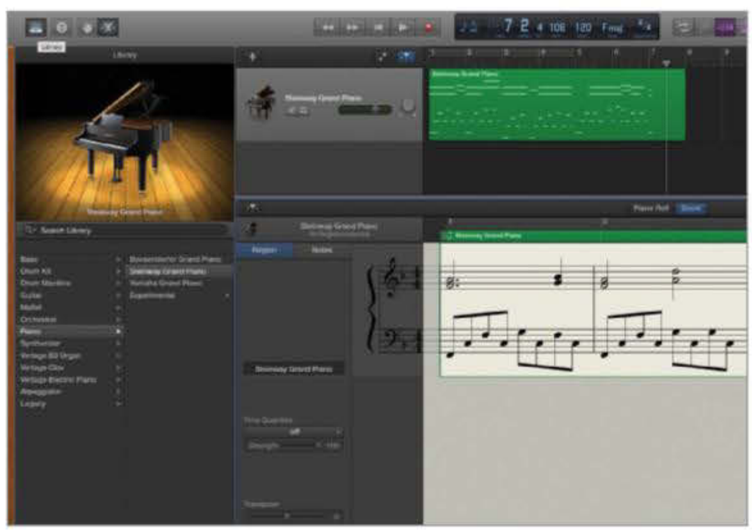
Computer connection
Regardless of the method you're using, you will likely have to connect your cable to your PC/ Mac via USB. Make sure you've got an empty port handy!

Keyboard connection
Either your two MIDI cables or single USB cable must go into the keyboard. The port will probably be at the back or on the side



03 Load up the software

With your instrument successfully hooked up, your computer should recognise it as an external device. Now you're connected, load up your music software of choice. We've chosen GarageBand. Play a chord on your keyboard/controller. If your keyboard/controller is hooked up correctly, the software will recognise it.



04 Record!

Now you're all set up, the only thing left is to make some sweet music! Click on the Record button and start playing on your keyboard – the software should recognise the pedals too, so don't be afraid to incorporate those as much as you think it necessary.

Record on a Mac

Learn to record piano concertos from the comfort of your Mac with a few simple clicks in GarageBand

Want to hear yourself back or record one of your own creations? Look no further than your Mac computer. GarageBand is a music-making application which comes pre-installed on your Mac as part of the iLife package. Whether you're a seasoned musician or someone who just wants to have a go at making some noise, GarageBand is the perfect place to get creative.

Technological developments have come a long way since the days of recording music to tape. Thanks to GarageBand, you no longer need a bank loan to be able to record a song. You don't even need any external equipment – computers enable you to plug your electric piano directly into a USB port and start recording straight away.

GarageBand has the facilities to record any instrument, whether that's via a microphone or plugged straight in. If you don't have an electric instrument, though, GarageBand has a variety of Software Instruments which sound just like the real thing, whose notes can be typed in using the Musical Typing tool or clicked in using the on-screen piano.

GarageBand is particularly good at recording piano because you can plug straight into your Mac as we covered on page 104 – it doesn't travel via any other equipment. It records you playing MIDI signals rather than real audio (although you do have an option to do so). This means that it's a lot easier to edit your tracks and change instrument sample, although you may lose the humanity of your recordings somewhat.

"You can plug your piano straight into your Mac"

Navigating GarageBand The main features and tools explained

Go back to the start
Rather than spending a few seconds pressing the Rewind button to go back to the beginning of the track, just click the icon to go straight back to the beginning of the recording – no waiting around required

Add effects
GarageBand's Inspector feature has a multitude of effects which you can apply to your recording. These can drastically change the sound of your recording, whether it's by adding a touch of reverb (echo), or distortion which turns a piano into something you might hear on a heavy metal track

Ready, set, record
Take a deep breath and click the Record button when you're ready to record your piano track. If you've set a metronome, this will 'click' for four beats before GarageBand starts recording your playing. GarageBand will continue recording you until you click the Stop icon or hit the space bar

"Take a deep breath and click the Record button when you're ready to record your piano track"

Top tip
Learn to Play
If you've only recently picked up a piano, GarageBand offers video piano lessons which cover the basics of playing. Head to the 'Learn to Play' section to find out how to play hit songs – taught by the artists who made them famous.



Set the tempo
The Tempo tool is often used to control the overall speed of a recording when using GarageBand's built-in loops. However, it can also be used to control the speed of the Metronome. Click the number and drag the slider upwards to increase the tempo and downwards to decrease it



Time signature
This changes the time signature of a project. See pages 38-39 for more on them

Cycle Region
If you've already recorded a track and want to record something else over the top of a particular section – for example, the chorus – use the Cycle Region tool to select part of the track and repeat it so you don't have to stop and start to get it right

Keeping time
Having an out-of-time recording is disastrous! However, GarageBand comes with a built-in Metronome, meaning you can keep in time, at all times. Click the Metronome icon to turn this feature on and off – it will glow blue when it's turned on and remain grey when it's switched off

Apple Loops
If you want to add some hard-hitting beats or a spot of light accompaniment, make sure you check out the Apple Loops menu. Use the tabs at the top to filter through the thousands of samples, then click on one to hear how it sounds. You could make a whole song using just these!

The next step

Get started with GarageBand

Record your first track straight onto your Mac



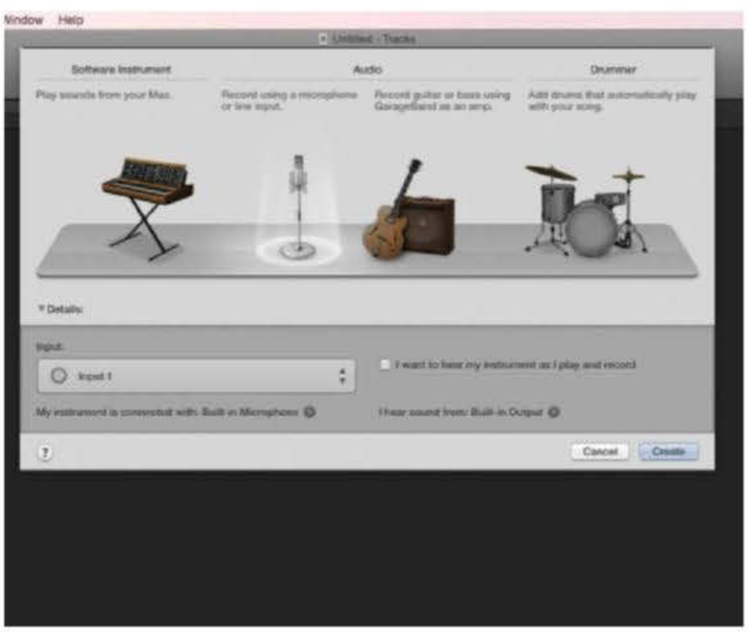
GarageBand is a really great recording tool for a beginner, as it's a low-cost option that's incredibly easy to use. It enables you to bring the recording studio into your Mac and all you have to do is show up at your computer with a keyboard and a handful of songs, and you're all set to create the next hit record using Apple's superlative music software.

GarageBand is built to record music – whether you want to record just one person with one instrument or a whole band. The software covers all areas of the creative recording process, from initially capturing the recorded sound, to editing it and applying effects. You are able to take a cleanly recorded instrument and make it sound just like it was recorded at Wembley Stadium with just a few simple clicks.

It isn't just a hub for live musicians, though. If you have never picked up an instrument or tinkled a piano key in your life, GarageBand has something for you. The software has several thousand loops pre-installed; loops are small samples of music which can be pulled together to make a completed song, and there are loops to suit every single style and cover every single instrument imaginable.

Even if you have absolutely no prior recording experience, recording is surprisingly easy with GarageBand. For digital pianists and keyboardists in particular, you can just plug in and play. Just connect via USB and GarageBand is already set for you to record some music (see page 104 for a tutorial). If you want to record an acoustic piano, you can set up a microphone and record in GarageBand with that. The tutorial below shows you how to record a live piano on Apple's fantastic software, including how to set up your very first project, picking the right settings and preferences, checking the levels and, finally, hitting that record button. So sit back, grab a cup of tea and your favourite tunes, and let's learn how to record your first piano track with GarageBand.

Record your piano Create live piano recordings



01 Get started

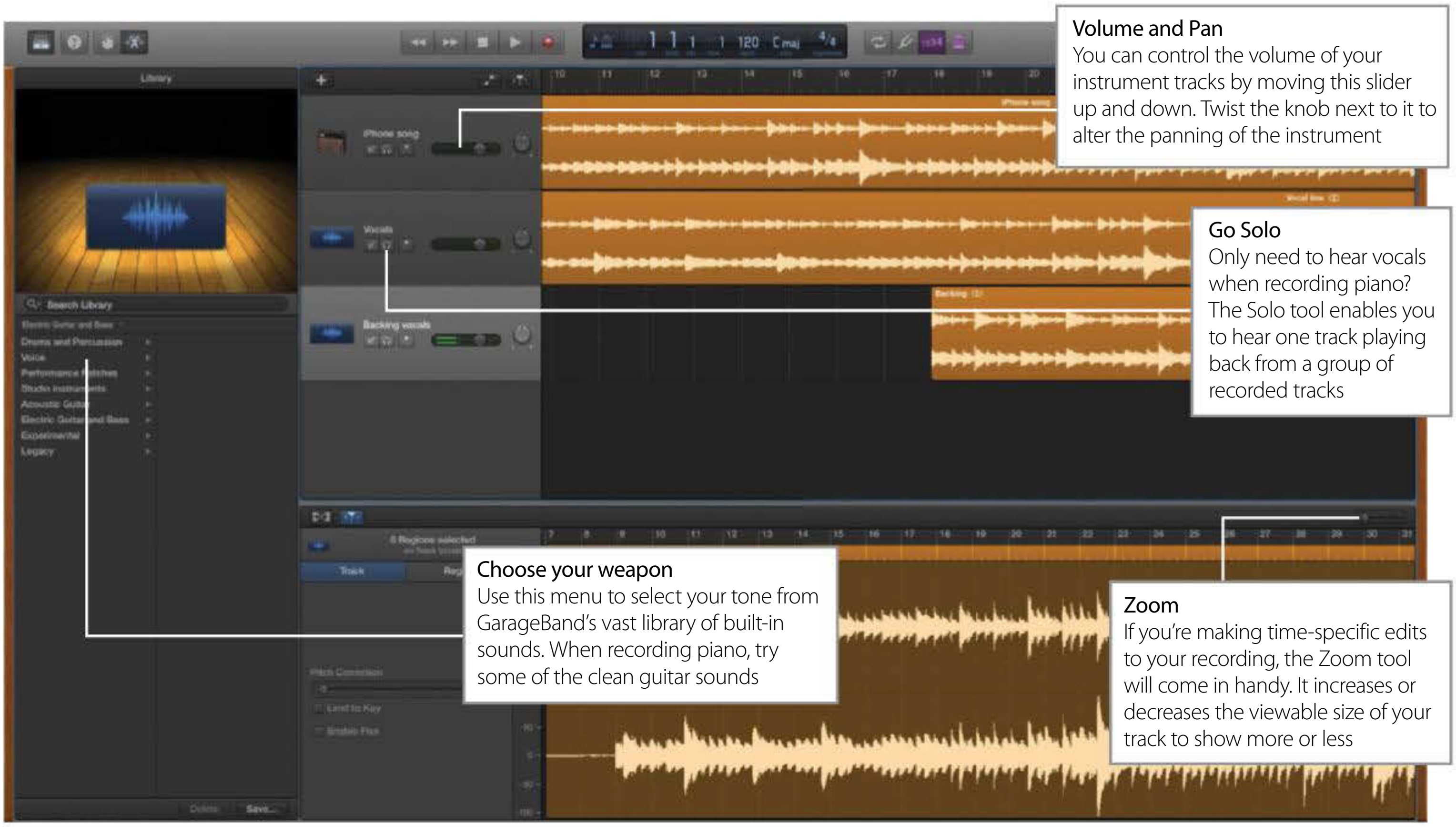
Open GarageBand. In the New Project window, select 'Empty Project' *not* 'Keyboard Collection'. When it has been set up, hit the + button and click 'Record using a microphone or line input' to record a live instrument.



02 Check your settings

Click GarageBand>Preferences. Choose the Audio/MIDI tab. This is where you control the preferences for any external instruments to be recorded, such as guitar or vocals. Select Audio Input then your Microphone or Built-in Input..

Explaining the interface A look at some of the tools in GarageBand

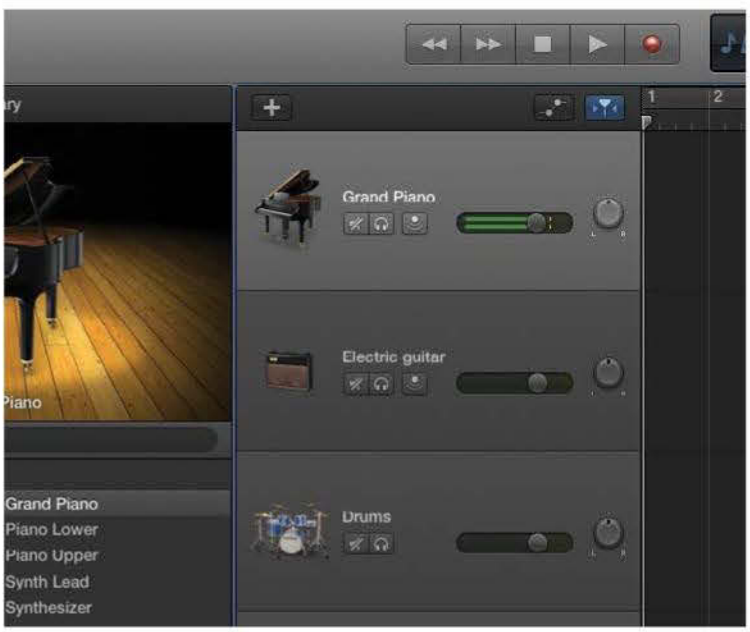


Volume and Pan
You can control the volume of your instrument tracks by moving this slider up and down. Twist the knob next to it to alter the panning of the instrument

Go Solo
Only need to hear vocals when recording piano? The Solo tool enables you to hear one track playing back from a group of recorded tracks

Choose your weapon
Use this menu to select your tone from GarageBand's vast library of built-in sounds. When recording piano, try some of the clean guitar sounds

Zoom
If you're making time-specific edits to your recording, the Zoom tool will come in handy. It increases or decreases the viewable size of your track to show more or less





Top tip
Play it safe
Recording your piano as cleanly as possible is recommended as GarageBand has lots of effects that you can play around with and add after you've finished recording. If there is any interference, your effect will be applied to that too!

03 Sound check

Now your mic should be set up, so play your piano! The level bars next to the track will flash green; if they glow red at the edge, turn your levels down using the track volume slider.

04 Hit Record

If you're happy with how your piano is sounding, this is your big moment! It's your chance to commit your work to 'tape'. Click the Record button and play away. Hit the space bar when you've finished playing.

Record on a PC

Getting a piano from analogue to digital involves the combination of a computer and the right software. Audacity is a great free option to start recording with

The path from piano zero to piano hero can be fraught with obstacles, but thanks to the PC and the right piece of software it can be a far smoother transition than expected. There is no need for the expensive studios or expert producers that come with a recording contract. All that is needed to record multilayered music tracks is a computer, a piano or keyboard and recording software such as Audacity.

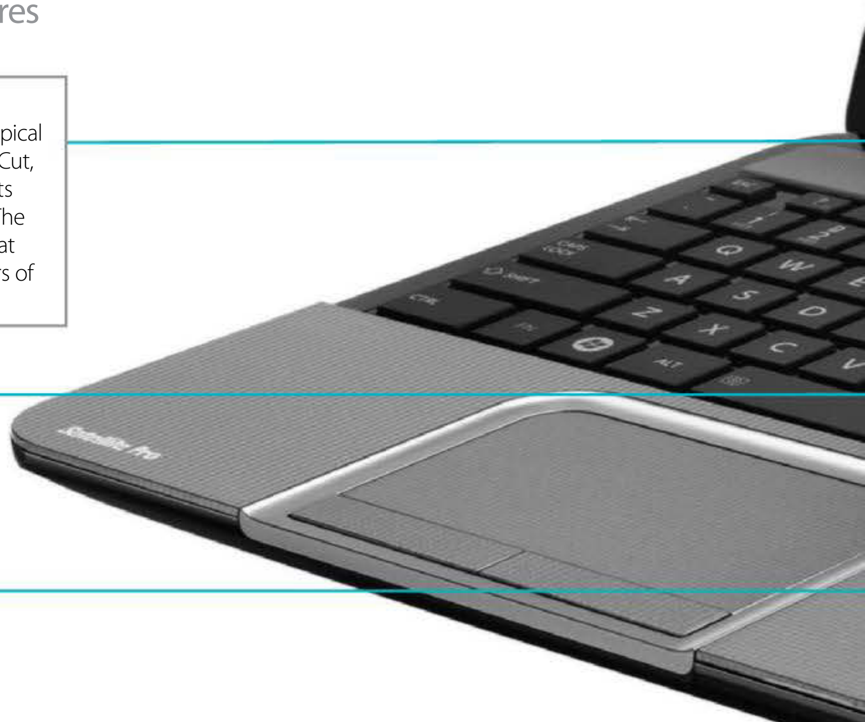
There are a host of software recording packages on the market, ranging from beginner to pro, costing nothing to thousands of pounds. A great option for beginners is Audacity, a powerful, free and open-source audio editor and recorder. The fact that Audacity is free makes it a great starting point for anyone who wants to start recording piano tracks and more. The program can be used to record live audio; convert tapes and vinyl into digital recordings; edit Ogg Vorbis, MP3, WAV or AIFF audio files; and mix sounds/tracks together.

Recording can be as simple as plugging in a microphone into a sound card and hitting the Record button. Alternatively, an instrument – like a digital piano – can be plugged directly into a sound card and recorded direct to the hard drive. Any recorded audio can be edited and tweaked until the desired result is achieved.

Audacity is an ideal package for those just starting out, but if you're looking to spend some money then there are more sophisticated, professional PC-compatible audio editors on the market. A leading industry-standard tool is Cubase (**www.steinberg.net**) which incorporates enough tools for professional-standard recording. Other contenders include Cakewalk Sonar (**www.cakewalk.com**) and Avid Pro Tools (**www.avid.com**).

"A great option for beginners is Audacity, a powerful, free and open-source audio editor and recorder"

Using Audacity The main tools and features



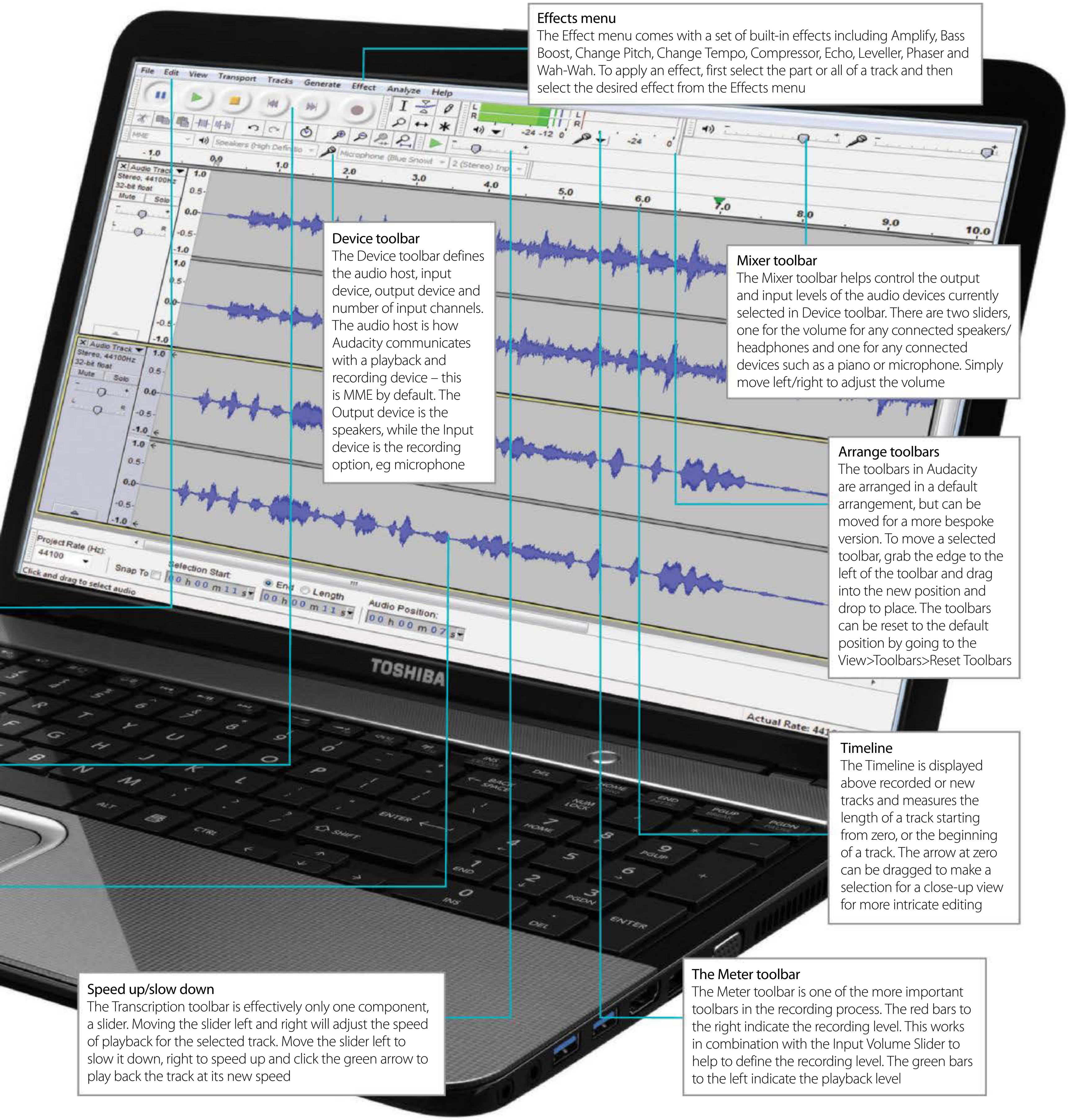
Take control
The Transport toolbar is used for controlling playback and recording. There is the standard selection with Play, Pause, Stop, Skip and Record buttons. To loop a track, hold down the Shift key when pressing the Play button. Pressing Record always creates a new track. To record on the same track, hold down Shift when pressing the Record button

Edit
The Edit toolbar offers access to all the typical components found in a set of edit tools. Cut, copy and paste are three key components which can be used to help build tracks. The zoom in/out tool allows for a closer look at an audio track or to show up to 200 hours of audio on a single screen

Audio tracks
As soon as the Record button is pressed, a track will appear with a waveform of the currently recording audio. Users can play back the current track(s). A new track can be added via the Tracks menu followed by Add New. Click the up arrow on the left of a track to collapse it and allow for the viewing of multiple tracks

Top tip
Hide unwanted toolbars
By default Audacity displays all available toolbars. To hide the toolbars you don't want, go to View>Toolbars and click to hide. Repeat to show a toolbar again or select Reset Toolbars to show all.

"Recording can be as simple as plugging in a microphone into a sound card and hitting the Record button"



Effects menu

The Effect menu comes with a set of built-in effects including Amplify, Bass Boost, Change Pitch, Change Tempo, Compressor, Echo, Leveller, Phaser and Wah-Wah. To apply an effect, first select the part or all of a track and then select the desired effect from the Effects menu

Device toolbar

The Device toolbar defines the audio host, input device, output device and number of input channels. The audio host is how Audacity communicates with a playback and recording device – this is MME by default. The Output device is the speakers, while the Input device is the recording option, eg microphone

Mixer toolbar

The Mixer toolbar helps control the output and input levels of the audio devices currently selected in Device toolbar. There are two sliders, one for the volume for any connected speakers/headphones and one for any connected devices such as a piano or microphone. Simply move left/right to adjust the volume

Arrange toolbars

The toolbars in Audacity are arranged in a default arrangement, but can be moved for a more bespoke version. To move a selected toolbar, grab the edge to the left of the toolbar and drag into the new position and drop to place. The toolbars can be reset to the default position by going to the View>Toolbars>Reset Toolbars

Timeline

The Timeline is displayed above recorded or new tracks and measures the length of a track starting from zero, or the beginning of a track. The arrow at zero can be dragged to make a selection for a close-up view for more intricate editing

Speed up/slow down

The Transcription toolbar is effectively only one component, a slider. Moving the slider left and right will adjust the speed of playback for the selected track. Move the slider left to slow it down, right to speed up and click the green arrow to play back the track at its new speed

The Meter toolbar

The Meter toolbar is one of the more important toolbars in the recording process. The red bars to the right indicate the recording level. This works in combination with the Input Volume Slider to help to define the recording level. The green bars to the left indicate the playback level

Get started with Audacity

Record your first track straight onto your PC

Whether you're wanting to record yourself to hear how your skills are shaping up, or you want to record a song you've thought up, Audacity is a great, free bit of software to help you record your playing. Audacity can be used to record audio from a variety of sources and edit it – you just need a few select bits of hardware, which you can find more on in our 'Recording hardware' section over the page.

An input and output device needs to be connected to the PC where any recording or editing is to take place. The output device is the component that will allow the user to hear any recorded audio; typically, this comprises headphones or speakers. An input device is the device with which the recording is going to be made. When recording a piano in Audacity there are two common scenarios: direct input or microphone. Direct input is where an instrument is plugged into a sound card ready for recording. The alternative is to use a microphone.

Once an input device has been recognised, the desired recording device will need to be selected from the Device toolbar. Alternatively, this can be set up via the Edit menu and Preferences>Devices. This will list the Interface option alongside the Playback and Recording device.

The Meter toolbar will need to be activated to set up the recording levels. Spend a little time playing with the Input Volume Slider to get the best recorded output. Make sure it is not too quiet, and make sure it is not too loud. With the levels set, it's time to record. Users are able to play back a single track, or hit Record again in order to create multiple tracks. Then it is time to bring out the producer in you; trimming tracks, adjusting volumes and adding effects to create a complete pro-sounding track. Follow this simple tutorial to take your first steps in recording, including getting connected and testing the levels.

"Once an input device has been recognised, the desired recording device will need to be selected from the Device toolbar"



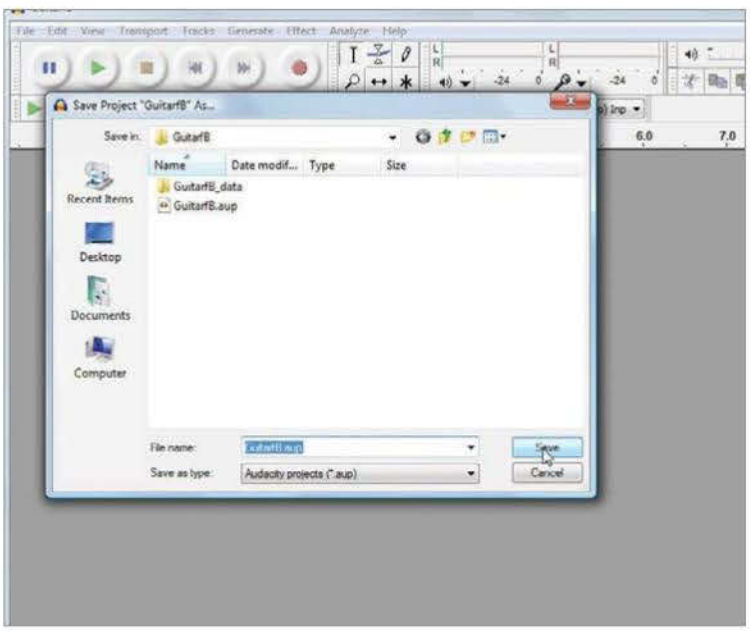
Location courtesy of Music Is Life, Bournemouth

Top tip
Add oomph

The recording levels of a piano may not always be exactly as expected; perhaps not as powerful as desired. To give some extra oomph to an individual track, select the audio and turn up the Gain slider under Mute/Solo.

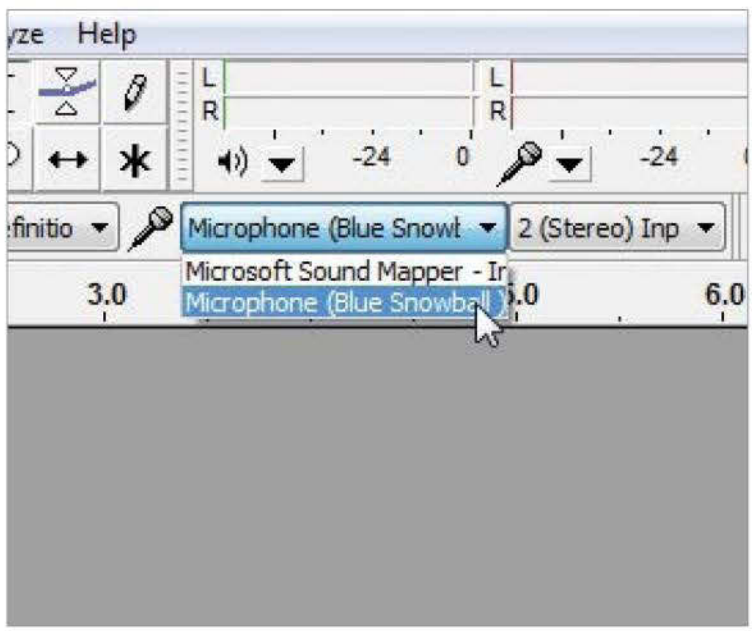
Record your piano

Create an audio track



01 Create a new project

By default Audacity will open at a project window. Before you start recording, the project must be saved. Head to the File menu and select 'Save project as'. Click the OK button, name the project and click Save.



02 Get connected

To record a track, an input device will need to be connected, eg microphone or direct input. The input device will be listed in the Device toolbar; select the desired device from the drop-down list.

Recording hardware

To start recording piano, there are a few possible hardware combinations to consider

Sound card



A sound card is as essential as a piano for the recording process. Thankfully, all computers come with a sound card built in. The quality of the card depends on the quality of the computer, but all will allow recording. A decent budget card – try Creative, Asus or M-Audio – is a good investment for better recordings.



Preamp/USB audio interface

A preamp is not an essential piece of equipment, but it can add more finesse and flexibility to a recording. Introducing a preamp/USB audio interface to the process will allow the user to boost the piano signal and produce a high output signal. Try M-Audio, Fast Trak or Avid for well-priced options.

Cables and jacks



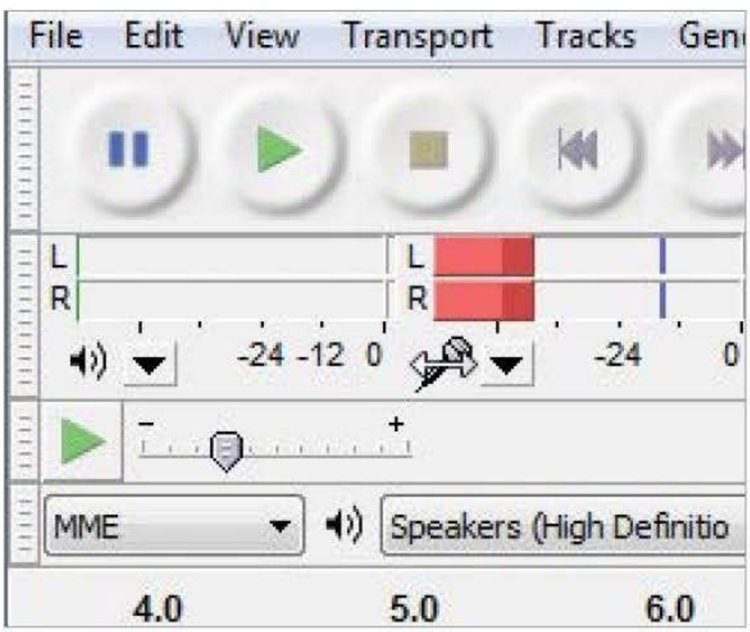
As well as via USB and MIDI you can record an electric piano by plugging into the sound card. For this, the right cable is needed. There are two options here: a single cable with a 1/4" (6.3mm) plug at one end (for the piano) and a 1/8" (3.5mm) mini-jack at the other, for the sound card (eg **http://bit.ly/LynKn1**). The alternative is a jack that converts a standard audio lead into a mini-jack.

Microphone



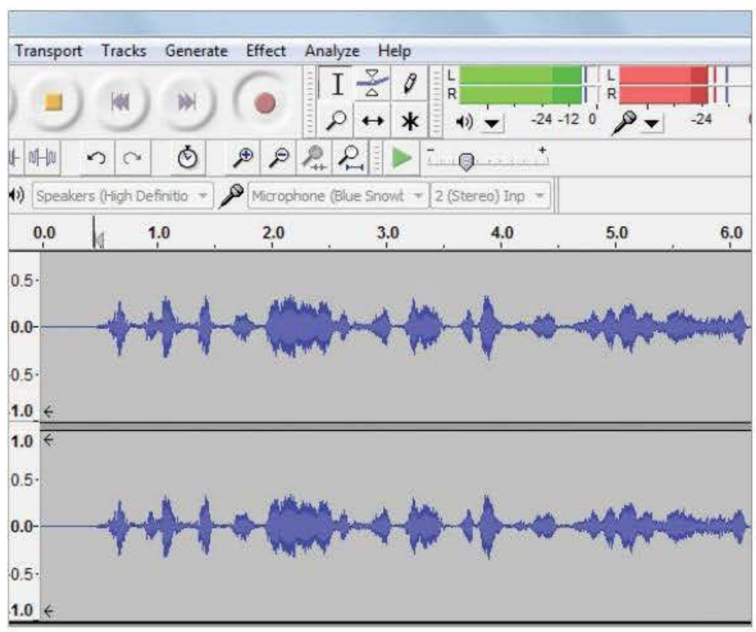
A microphone is the ideal recording companion, especially for those using an acoustic instrument. There are plenty of options here, from budget to pro level. A basic desktop microphone will do the job, but the quality will not be as good. For better-quality recordings, a more expensive microphone, such as the Blue Snowball with Audio HD, can be used.

"The ideal recording companion"



03 Test the levels

Before recording, the levels need to be tested. In the Meter toolbar click the microphone icon to activate the input meter. Now play the connected piano to view levels. Adjust the Input Volume Slider accordingly.



04 Record track

To start recording, simply hit the red Record button and start playing. When finished, hit the Stop button. To play back the recording, hit the Play button. Click on the track to start at a different point.

Improve your technique with apps

Get started, hone the basics, then get creative on the piano using these apps for your iPhone and iPad

Smartphones and tablets are fantastic tools to aid creativity thanks to their scope and power. It is now possible to see sheet music for your favourite musician's latest album and get virtual lessons on various instruments from the App Store. The piano is one such instrument that is brilliantly catered for, with apps on offer to take you through everything, from the very first time you sit at a piano, to the point of writing your own portfolio of songs.

The beauty of using your own device is that it takes away some of the daunting nature of having to sit at a full size piano. Instead you can sit back in comfort (wherever you may be), iPad in front of you, and experiment as you wish. Just a few quick downloads from the App Store and you can have every variation of piano or keyboard in front of you, as well as virtual teachers to guide you through every possible process you could ever wish to learn.

These pages will highlight some of the best apps for improving your piano skills, regardless of your experience. We will take you through from the very beginning, up to getting more creative and writing and playing your own music.

Top tip

Choose wisely

If you have both a tablet and a smartphone, make sure you pick the best version of the app you want. For example, it would be better to use a chord finder on a phone, as it's always on you. On the other hand, there's not much point in a sheet music reader on anything but a tablet. You may have to pay for an app twice if you want it on both formats!



GarageBand

Price: Free
Developer: Apple

GarageBand is probably the most instantly recognisable of all the apps featured here, coming as part of Apple's iLife suite on both desktop and mobile. The piano section of GarageBand not only contains a bigger variation of keyboards than any other app here, but also includes Smart Keyboard, where users can select a note and then have a melody created for them. It's a really nifty way to learn about notes and keys that work well together. Of course, having the editing power of GarageBand at your disposal makes it a breeze to mix your piano creations with other music tracks from some other instruments.

Virtuoso Piano Free 3

Price: Free
Developer: Peter Nagy

The app in amongst this selection that boasts the most functionality, Virtuoso responds when you tap the keys in different ways in order to give a more realistic sound. It therefore provides an experience most akin to that of playing a real piano, making it very valuable as a learning tool. And if you are taking the learning plunge with a musical buddy, the app also supports duet mode on iPad, allowing two people to play simultaneously. This is a great way of learning, as you can encourage each other and learn to harmonise - and the app format makes the whole experience a little more relaxed and fun. Virtuoso also comes with support for AirPlay, so should you want to put on a performance for friends and family via your TV, or simply use it to see your finger work on a bigger screen, this is the app for you.

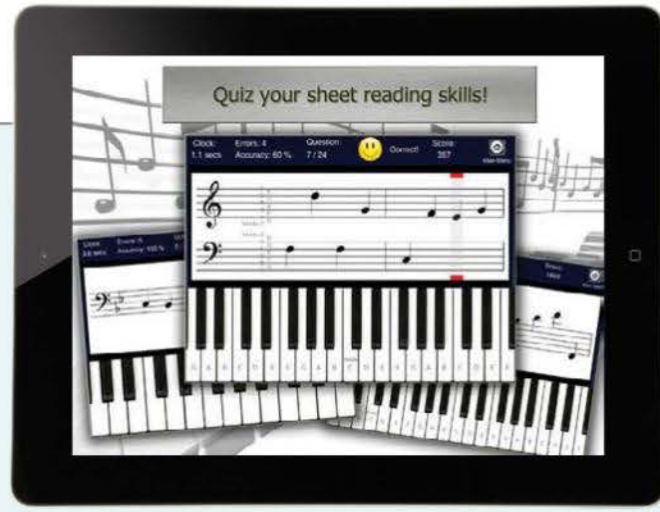




Piano Tutor for iPad

Price: £2.29
Developer: SmileyApps

A great way to measure your progress when it comes to sheet music reading skills is by using the quiz section in this app. Piano Tutor will highlight a note on the sheet music and then ask users to hit the correct note on the on-screen keyboard. Your speed of response will be clocked, and with a range of tests (each one containing 24 questions) you can give your knowledge a strenuous workout before getting back to learning by playing the simple songs that also come in the app.



> "Through competition, Magic Piano injects a nice taste of fun into the learning experience, keeping you interested and engaged"

Magic Piano

Price: Free
Developer: Smule

Magic Piano brings another element to the learning table in the form of competition. There is a big gaming aspect to this app, which allows you to earn points for how well you play along to popular songs. Magic Piano also contains a range of different keyboards to play should you want a change, and the beams of light to guide you to the correct note are a good way of perfecting your finger work on the keys. Magic Piano injects a nice taste of fun into the learning experience, keeping you interested and engaged.

Tiny Piano

Price: Free
Developer: Squarepoet, Inc.

A basic app in terms of functions and interface, but Tiny Piano comes with a host of modern songs for users to learn. This app actually places you in charge of the timing, so is very good for developing your understanding of tempo. For an added confidence boost, the app allows you to tap anywhere to play the next note, rather than on the keyboard itself if you're stuck. It's a nice tool should you want to learn the melody and notes first, before going back and trying to play it yourself.
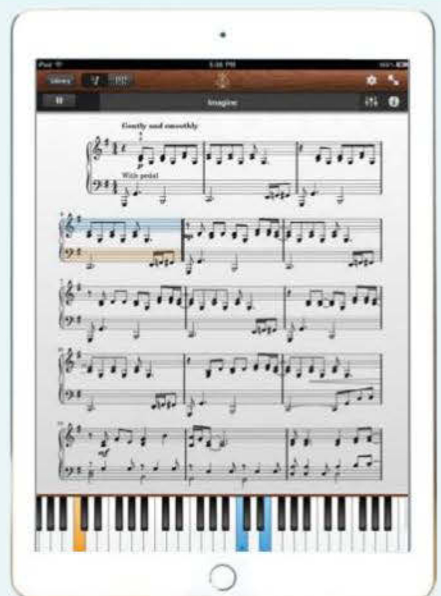


Nota for iPad

Price: £2.29
Developer: All Forces

A brilliantly simple and usable app, Nota is a combination of reference guide, quiz and solid learning tool, making it essential to new piano users. Tap a note on the keyboard to see it shown as a character of sheet music, giving you the chance to instantly learn and remember the placement and look of each note. There is also a complete reference book full of all the key terms and definitions of every aspect of sheet music. Then, once you think you know your stuff, there is the quiz mode to turn to and test your degree of knowledge.
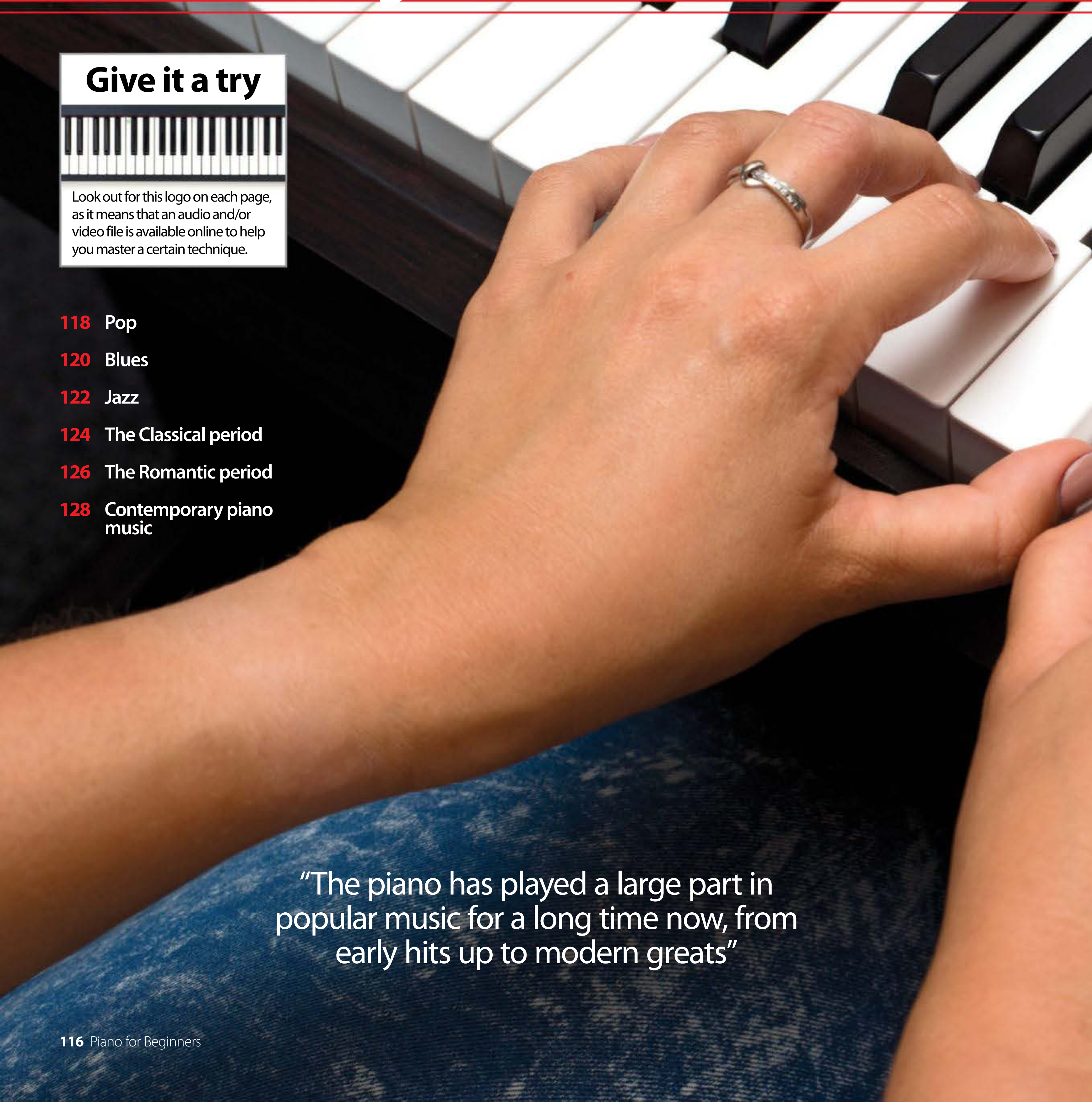




Steinway Etude

Price: Free
Developer: Steinway Musical Instruments

One of the most impressive aspects of Etude is the in-app store, where users can download songs and access the sheet music. As the song plays and the coloured indicators move along the sheet, the notes on the keyboard are also highlighted below. This means you can firstly begin to understand how sheet music is formed, and then begin to play along with it. So not only can you use the app as a digital play book, but also as a vital learning tool.

Play in the style of…

Discover how certain genres get that distinct sound and learn how you can achieve it



Give it a try

Look out for this logo on each page, as it means that an audio and/or video file is available online to help you master a certain technique.

"The piano has played a large part in popular music for a long time now, from early hits up to modern greats"



Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Pop

Pleasant progressions and simple melodies have helped the piano become part of some of the world's most-loved songs

The piano has played a significant role in popular music for a long time now, from early hits like The Righteous Brothers' version of the classic *Unchained Melody* to modern greats like Adele's *Set Fire To The Rain*. The piano tends to take one of two roles in a pop song: as a backing instrument that adds depth to the accompaniment, which will usually consist of drums, bass, and guitar; or as the only instrument backing a powerful singer for a ballad-like song. Either way, the piano will rarely take centre stage in a pop song. This means it can tend to be a less demanding place to start when focusing on a genre of music to practise on.

As a backing instrument among several others, the piano will probably only be playing chords on the right hand and maybe bass notes on the left. Note that a bass guitar would likely be present, so a left-hand part isn't usually essential. These chords will normally be played on the beat and probably won't deviate from the chord progression on which the song is based. When a piano is duetting with a vocal performance, the parts will be more elaborate to add interest when the vocalist isn't singing. This means that more demanding songs to try on piano will likely feature fewer backing instruments.

Pop music relies on mostly simple chord progressions, so in most instances you'll be playing melodies based on major, minor and perhaps seventh chords. Try to limit your progressions to around four chords. For a couple of a catchy progressions, try i-VI-III-VII and I-V-vi-IV. In the key of C these would be: C minor-Ab major-Eb major-Bb major, and C major-G major-A minor-F major.

> "The piano will rarely take centre stage in a pop song"



Inspirational works

Top pop albums to sink your teeth into



A Thousand Miles

Artist: Vanessa Carlton
Year: 2002 **Label:** A&M

Love it or loathe it, the exceptionally catchy piano riff that runs throughout this song will be stuck in your head all day. Written as a tribute to Carlton's grandfather, the hit single from her album *Be Not Nobody* is a great place to start for some pop inspiration.



Doo-Wops and Hooligans

Artist: Bruno Mars
Year: 2010 **Label:** Atlantic/Elektra

This chart-topping album features some Reggae, R&B, Soul and Rock to name but a few. He is also a celebrated pop pianist; his skills are showcased particularly well on the urban ballad, *Just the Way You Are*.



Takk…

Artist: Sigur Rós
Year: 2005 **Label:** Geffen/EMI

The enchanting single *Hoppípolla* is a beautiful piece to learn on the piano, and has been showcased in countless films and television shows. Be prepared to be utterly swept away by this truly epic ethereal album as it draws on a range of influences.



A Rush of Blood to the Head

Artist: Coldplay
Year: 2002 **Label:** Parlophone

Featuring the legendary piano anthems *Clocks and The Scientist*, this album is jam packed full of extremely beautiful, seemingly effortless motifs that embrace simplicity in an extremely clever way.

Sarah McLachlan

A Pop-Piano Angel

Sarah McLachlan is renowned for her enchanting mezzo-soprano vocals and tear-jerking ballads. The Canadian songstress is classically trained on the piano, which features heavily in much of her music. Her hit single 'Angel', inspired by the fatal overdose of fellow pop-rock pianist, Jonathon Melvoin, is a truly beautiful piece to listen to and to learn. Many of McLachlan's songs, like those of numerous other pop composers, are relatively simple in terms of their structure; using subtle variations on the classic four chord formula (root, fourth, fifth, minor second) combined with resolution chords (such as sus2).

Top tip
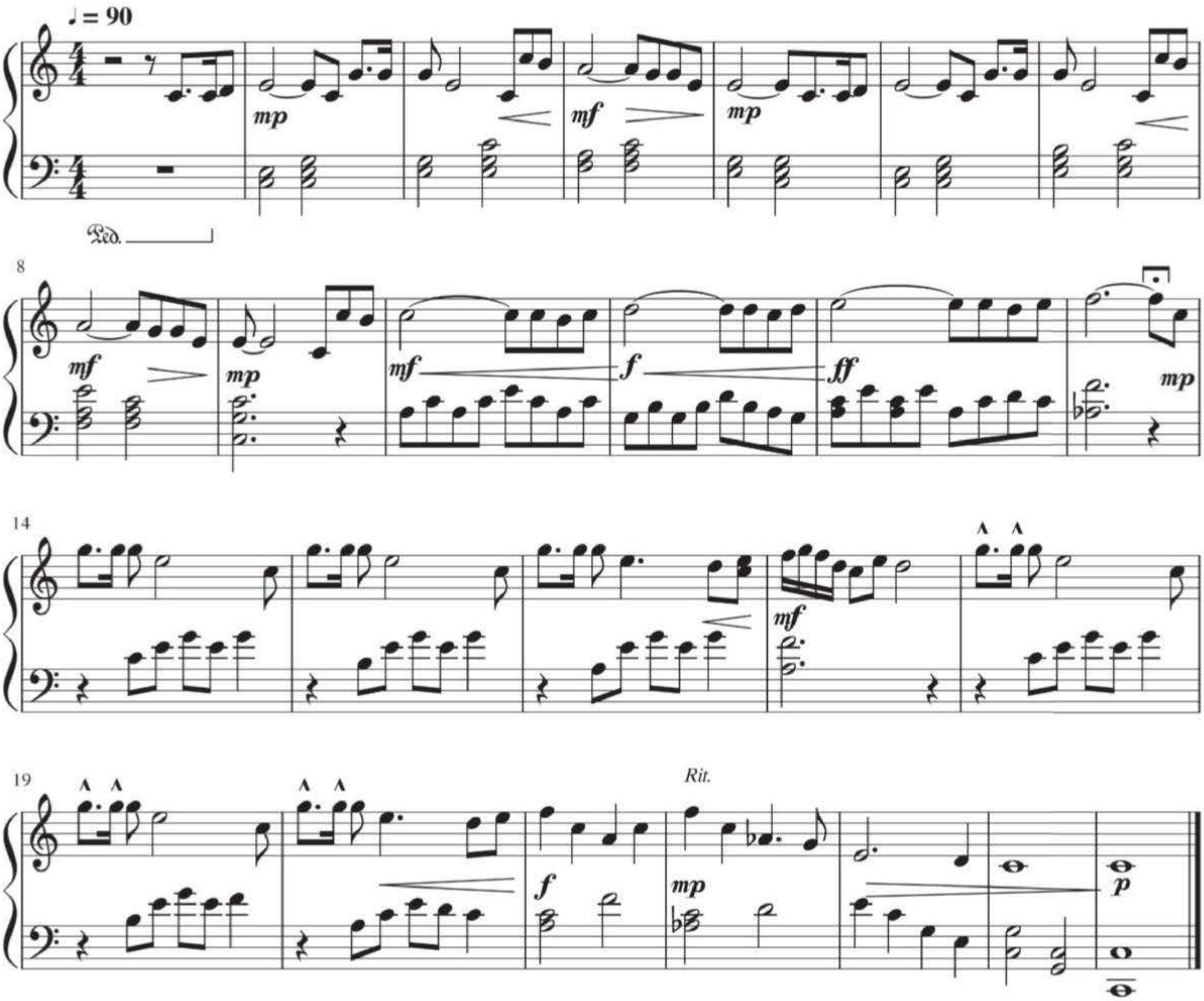
Keep pedaling

The key to mastering smooth transitions between chords as Sarah does so beautifully, is to learn when to apply the sustain pedal. In this practice piece, lifting your foot at the start of each bar will sustain the harmonies and create a deeper sound.



Give it a try

Try the pop style with the music below



Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Blues

A broad genre with a few defining characteristics, blues is bound to have something for you

As a genre, blues music has been around for a long time (well over a century now) and the piano has been a huge part of its sound for the duration. While it has a lot of sub-genres – some well known, like boogie woogie and delta blues, others not so well known – there are a few components that remain consistent among songs of this genre, appearing time and time again.

The first of these components is blue notes. These notes give the blues genre its distinctive sound. While these notes don't fit into any major scale, they are still notes that can be found on the piano or keyboard. For example, they will usually present as flattened third, flattened fifth/sharpened fourth and flattened seventh notes of a scale. So in a C major scale, the blue notes would be Eb-Gb/F#-Bb. The Eb and Bb are already flattened on the minor scale. So it may help you remember a natural minor scale and only flatten the fifth. On other instruments these notes may be tuned down even further, and if your keyboard supports microtonal tuning you may want to experiment.

The second component that defines the blues genre – through all its variations – is its form. Many songs of the blues genre use an I-IV-V progression across 12 or 16 bars. If you were to play an E blues (a common blues for a guitarist), it would feature E-A-B – the first, fourth and fifth degrees of the E major scale.

Improvisational solos are also a big part of blues piano playing. However, the good news is that you can stick to the corresponding blues scale's notes; use these and your solos should sound great.

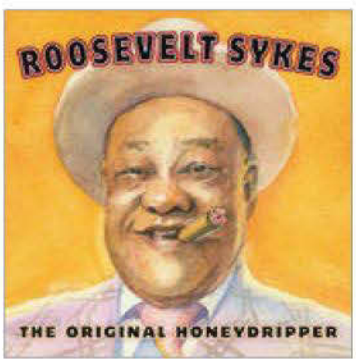
"Improvisational solos are a big part of blues piano playing"

© Svein M Agnalt



Inspirational works

Some of the greatest piano blues records



The Honeydripper

Artist: Roosevelt Sykes
Year: 1961 **Label:** Bluesville

Roosevelt Sykes is renowned for his top-tapping, boogie-woogie piano as well as his risqué lyrics. This album remains one of the greats from a true legend of the genre, who dominated the blues piano scene for well over six decades.



Tasty Blues

Artist: Little Brother Montgomery
Year: 1961 **Label:** Prestige / Bluesville 1012

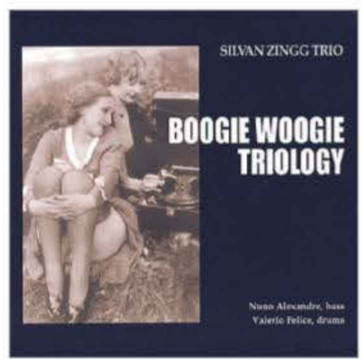
One of the most versatile pianists of the 20th century, and this aptly named album showcases his Chicago-style blues to perfection. He is renowned for keeping the true heritage of blues music at the heart.



Eagle Rock Rag

Artist: Lead Belly
Year: 2015 **Label:** Sandrew Metronome

This record is a great example of raw ragtime blues. Written in 2/4 or 4/4 time, with a characteristic left hand pattern of bass notes on odd-numbered beats and chords on even-numbered beats, with a syncopated right hand blues melody.



Boogie-woogie trilogy

Artist: Silvan Zingg Trio
Year: 2008 **Label:** CD Baby

Silvan Zingg loves boogie-woogie blues so much, he founded an international festival to celebrate it. This album sees Zingg's smooth blues piano alongside the equally talented Nuno Alexandre on double bass and Valerio Felice on drums.

Kenny Wayne

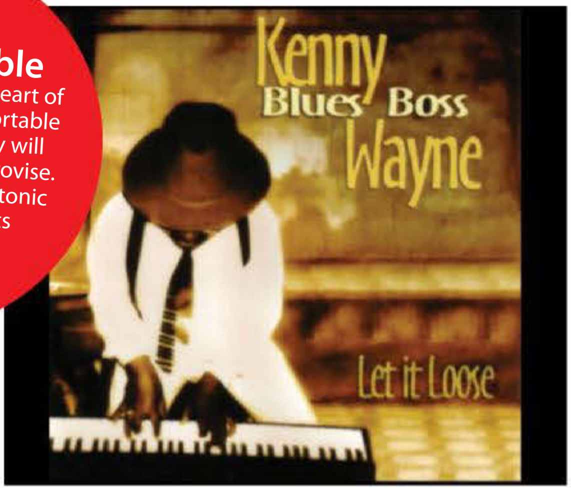
The Boss of Blues

Kenny "Blues Boss" Wayne is a true maestro of both blues and jazz piano. He is world-renowned for his raw and edgy style of boogie-woogie playing. Whilst boogie-woogie piano is melodically similar to traditional styles of blues music, it is instantly recognisable by the use of an upbeat bass figure designed to get people dancing. This simple riff is repeated throughout most of the tune and transposed with each chord change, making it ideal for beginners to try. Make sure to really stomp out the bass note at the beginning of each bar!

Top tip
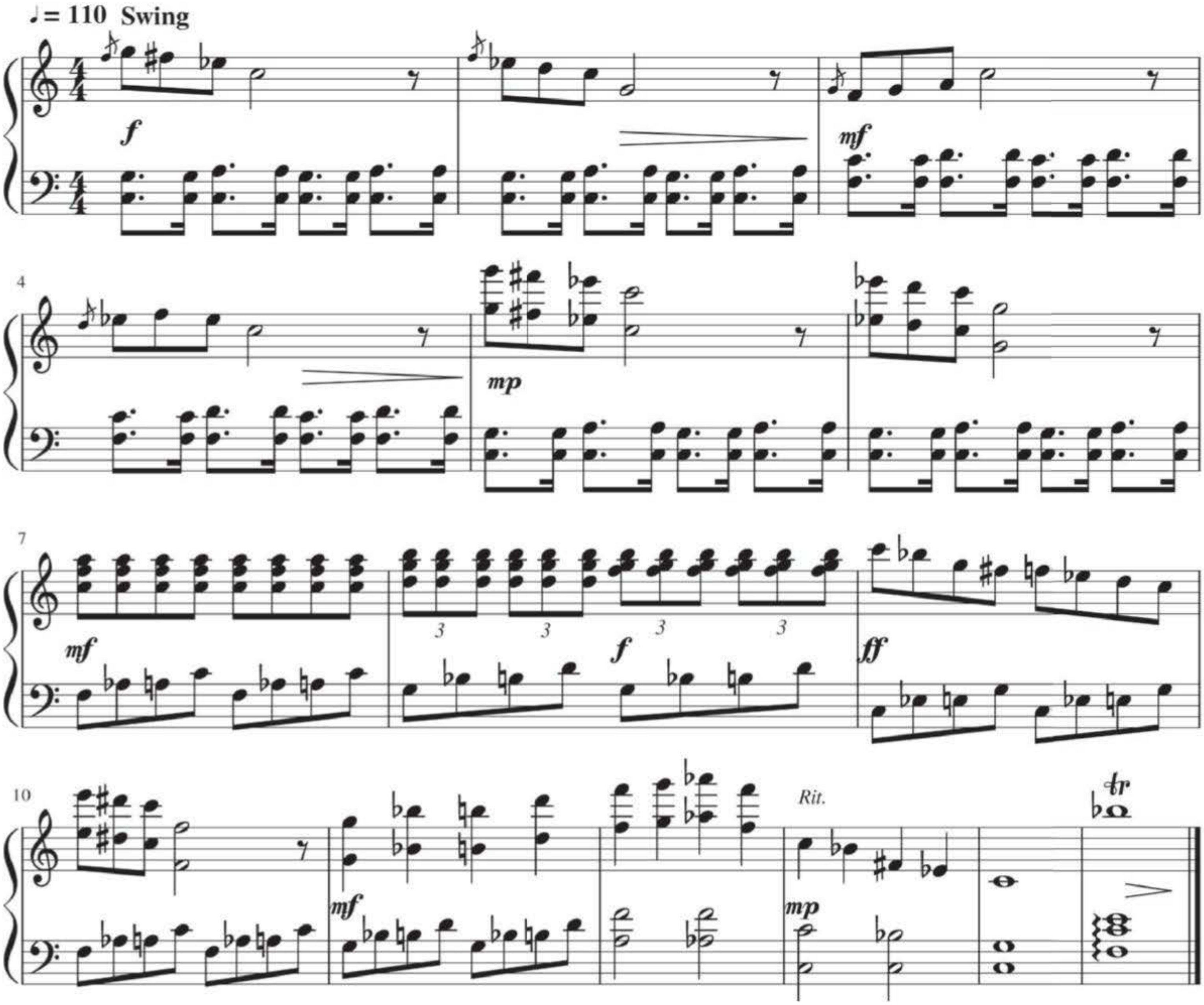
Get comfortable

The blues scale is at the heart of this genre. Getting comfortable with finding it in any key will give you freedom to improvise. Learn this six-note pentatonic scale by memorising its distinctive sound, and then practice transposing it.



Give it a try

Embrace the blues with the following piece



Give it a try

Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Jazz

Immerse yourself in this passionate and diverse genre, which demands musical skill

As it's one of the most complex musical genres in the world, playing jazz is often regarded as the ultimate test of a musician's ability. Like the genre in general, jazz pianists rarely stick to any musical templates or rules – any time signature or chord structure goes! Relatively simple chords like major sevenths (maj7) are very common, but other commonly used chord types of the jazz sound include augmented sevenths and minor ninths, which are rarely played in other types of popular music. The one rule-of-thumb of jazz music is that there are no rules in jazz music; pretty much anything goes, and there isn't much that doesn't belong in a jazz number.

Early on in the genre's development, the piano often took a leading role. This was mainly thanks to its ability to play chords (unlike instruments such as the trumpet) and the fact that it could carry a bass line in addition to the melody. It is the piano's variety that makes it a staple of the jazz sound. As the genre has progressed over time, so has the instrumentation. This has led to the piano taking more of a back seat in an ensemble – but thanks to jazz's unorthodox structures, even backing parts can be slippery beasts.

Improvisation is also a significant part of jazz piano playing. Skilled jazz pianists may eschew sheet music in favour of playing unscripted melodies based on the scales and arpeggios on the chord progression of the piece. However, these chord progressions aren't exactly basic I-IV-Vs, so an improvisational jazz pianist will need a vast knowledge of chords, scales and arpeggios in order to successfully perform.



© Robert Dróżd

"Skilled jazz pianists may eschew sheet music in favour of playing unscripted melodies"

Inspirational works

Get to grips with some jazz standards



The Girl in the Other Room

Artist: Diana Krall
Year: 2004 **Label:** Verve

The extremely distinctive contralto tones of Krall's voice, combined with some seductively smooth melodies, make this an ideal album to ease you into the many different forms of jazz piano.



The Bandwagon

Artist: Jason Moran
Year: 2010 **Label:** Blue Note Records

This incredible live recording showcases Moran as the Jazz virtuoso he truly is. From foot-stomping, upbeat and hectic melodies, to smooth urban melodies that bring you right back to the world of 21st century jazz.



Twentysomething

Artist: Jamie Cullum
Year: 2003 **Label:** UCJ, Candid Records, Verve

Jamie Cullum's use of piano percussion adds a whole other dimension to his sound by tapping out rhythms on the top of the piano, underneath the piano, and even on the hammers and strings.



Gouache

Artist: Jacky Terrasson
Year: 2012 **Label:** Universal Music

This eclectic album by the hugely talented Jacky Terrasson features covers of hits by John Lennon, and Amy Winehouse. Whilst this may not be the most original album out there, the fusion of intricate jazz piano and classic pop hits is too good to miss!

Count Basie

A legendary figure in the jazz piano world

William James "Count" Basie ruled the jazz scene for over half a century, as both an accomplished pianist and bandleader. He was renowned for his spare and yet exuberant style of playing, that always had a strong element of swing. In 1935, Basie formed the Count Basie Orchestra, which he led for almost 50 years. The group maintained their popularity throughout the decades due to Basie's constant creative innovations, including the use of two "split" tenor saxophones, and riffing with a big band. Many famous musicians came to prominence under his direction, including the singer Joe Williams.

Top tip
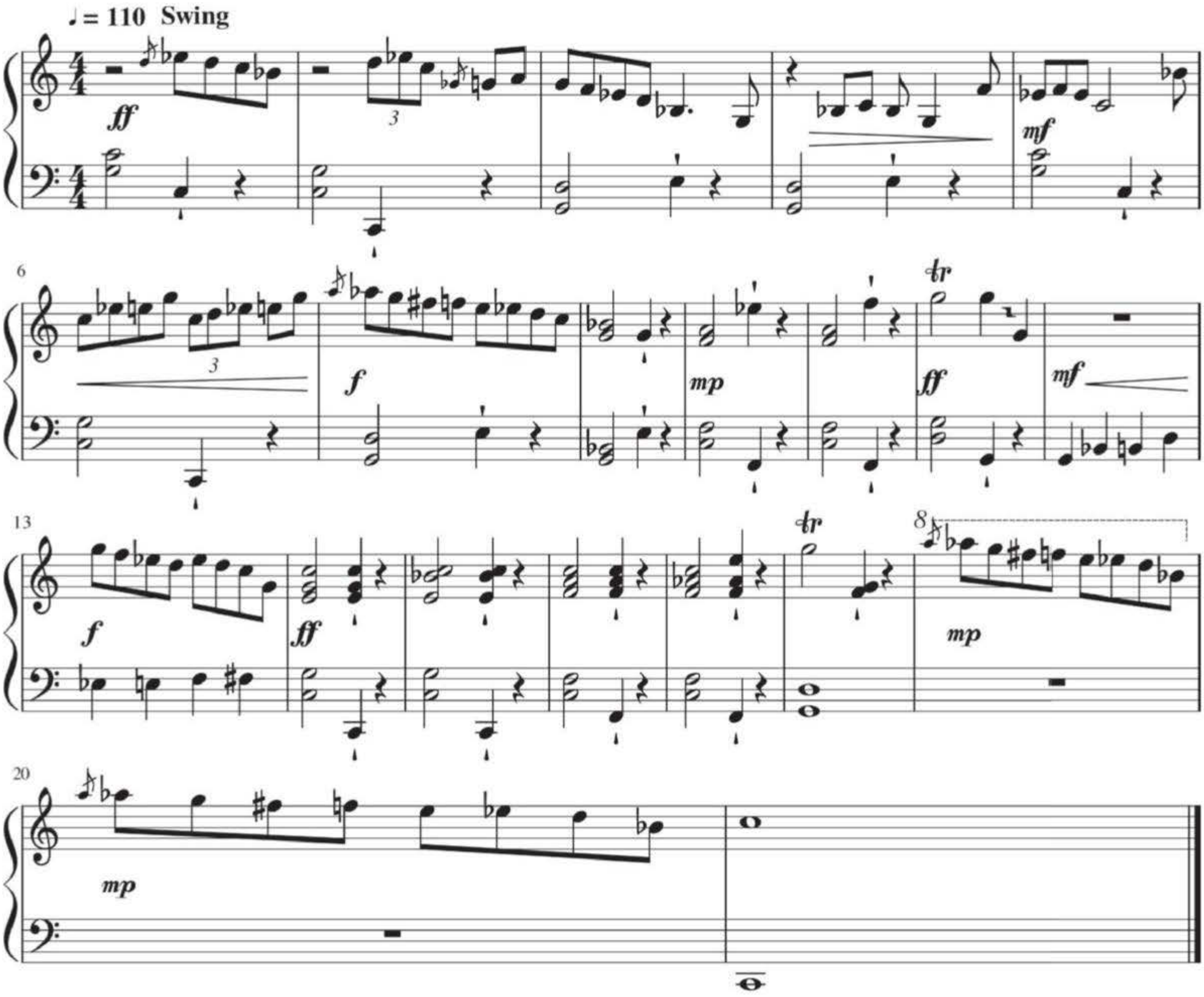
Swing like Basie

Notes with equal written time values are performed with unequal durations, alternating long and short. For two quavers, the first should last slightly longer than the second, but the two should still fit within one beat.



Give it a try

Be bold and try experimenting with jazz



Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

The Classical period

Rich, obvious melodies and simple patterns define this important musical era

Western classical music after 1600 can be divided into four different eras: Baroque, Classical, Romantic and 20th Century. While the Baroque era (around 1600-1740) relied heavily on keyboard music, the preferred instrument of choice was usually a harpsichord, an ancestor of the piano and the organ.

By the mid-18th Century, however, the Classical period had arrived, and it featured solo music composed on the fortepiano, which was an early version of the piano we know and love today. The Baroque era's elaborate flourishes and confusing multiple melodies were gradually replaced by homophonic texture, where multiple instruments would play one melody over an accompaniment. In Classical-era piano music specifically, simple arpeggios and Alberti bass were used a lot with the left hand. They were used as repeated accompaniment patterns to keep the piece flowing but not lessen the importance of the melody.

The Classical era was home to many of the world's most famous composers, many of whom remain household names today. These include Joseph Haydn, who wrote many works for piano, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, one of the most talented composers to have ever lived, and Ludwig Van Beethoven, a highly influential pianist who wrote several piano sonatas and concertos and was a key proponent in the transition from classical to romantic music.



"The Classical era was home to many of the world's most famous composers"

Inspirational works

Great classical piano pieces



Fantasia No. 3 in D minor

Artist: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Year: 1782

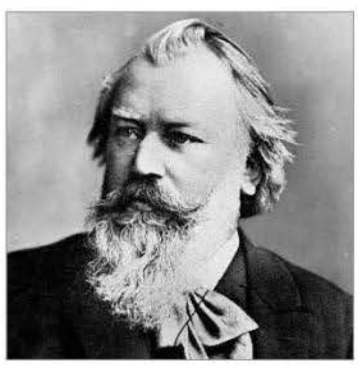
This enchantingly ominous piece is one of Mozart's most popular piano solos and great to learn. It is said that the ending was actually written by August Eberhard Müller, as the piece was left unfinished at his death.



Piano Sonata No. 52 in E-flat major

Artist: Joseph Haydn
Year: 1794

This was the last of Haydn's infamous piano sonatas, and is considered by many to be his greatest. The entire piece is an outstanding display of technical skill and beautiful, unique harmonic structure.



Opus 49, No.4

Artist: Johannes Brahms
Year: 1868

This recognisable melody is possibly the most famous lullaby in the world. If you can resist drifting off to this beautiful piece, then listen out for the intricate use of simple harmonies and triads that provide a tender contrast to Brahms' orchestral compositions.



Lang Lang in Paris

Artist: Lang Lang
Year: 2015 **Label:** Sony Classical Records

Lang Lang is one of the most accomplished pianists of the 21st century, offering technically solid and yet expressively innovative renditions of some of Chopin and Tchaikovsky's best-loved pieces.

Franz Schubert

A master of solo piano composition

Franz Schubert was considered one of the last composers of the Classical period and one of the first of the Romantic period, with a clear progression through these genres visible in his work. In his early years, influences from Beethoven and Mozart are clearly seen in his use of formal structures and dramatic harmonies. Throughout the later stages of his career, he developed a more discursive, experimental sound that was sadly not fully appreciated until after his death in 1828. During his short life of just 31 years, Schubert had a tremendous influence over the way in which melodies for solo piano were structured.

Top tip
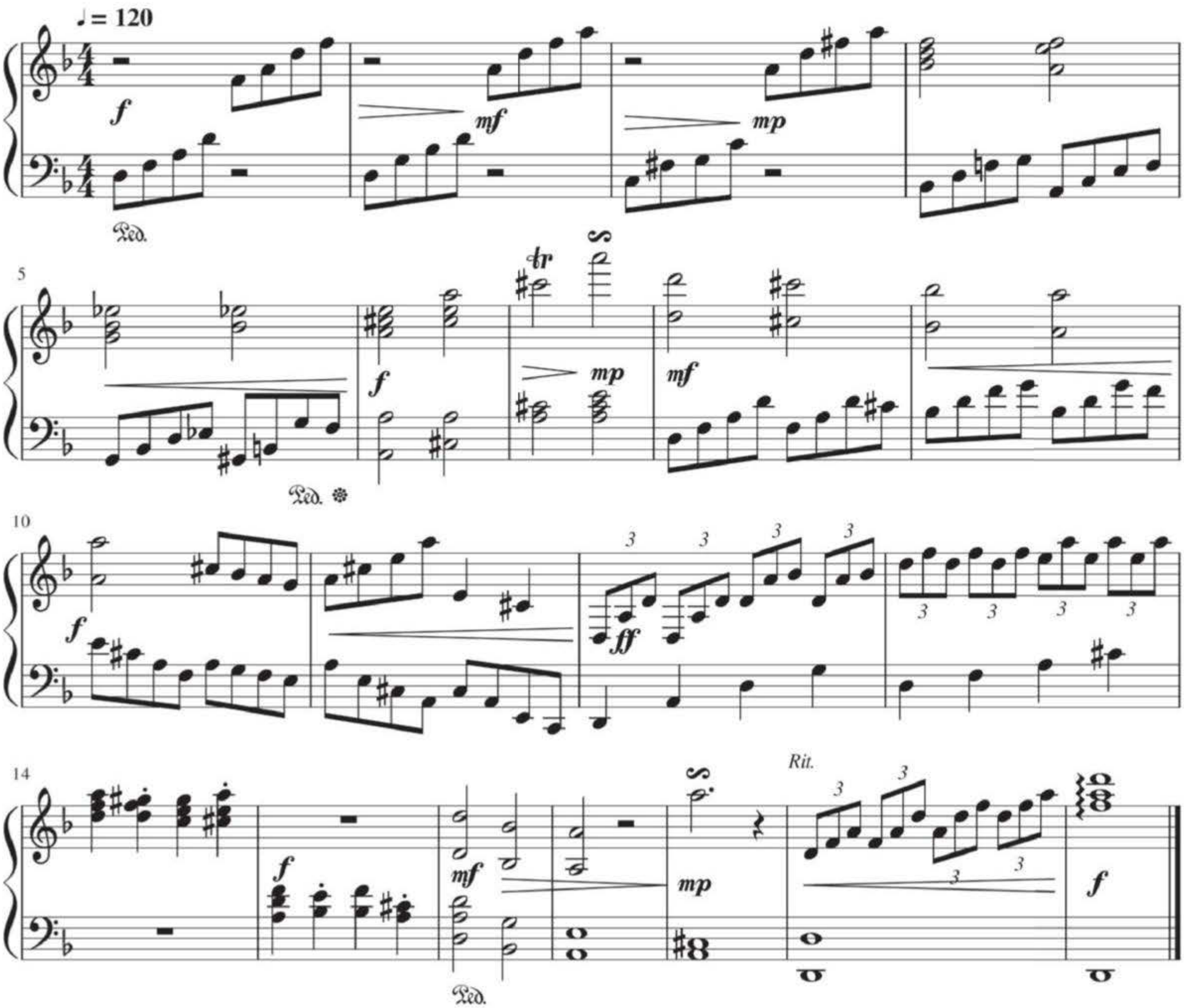
Amazing arpeggios

As Schubert transitioned between the Classical and Romantic periods, arpeggios featured heavily in his work. In an arpeggio, the notes of a chord are played in either ascending or descending succession. Try holding the sustain pedal down for each arpeggio to create fluidity.



Give it a try

See if the Classical period is for you



Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

The Romantic period

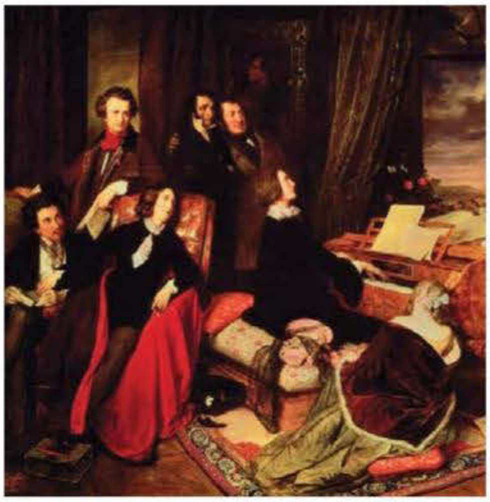
The next era in classical music ushered in freedom and creativity

The Romantic revolution throughout the 19th Century wasn't just felt in music – the desire to express emotion and creativity swept across the literary and artistic worlds too – but it may have had its biggest impact here. The piano was a massive part of it, thanks to gradual improvements in its form. Indeed, it could be argued that the piano was the most important instrument of the Romantic era as it grew in popularity throughout this period.

While the era's symphonies grew larger in size and became more grandiose in scale with more and more instruments being used, piano solo pieces started getting shorter and more digestible. As a result, the piano became a more popular instrument. These miniatures went by names like 'Nocturne' and 'Etude', and helped earn the piano a new audience. Also born out of the Romantic era was the 'virtuoso' movement, of which Franz Liszt was a big part. A term still used to this day, the virtuoso would wow the audience with a display of pure skill on their instrument, which, on the piano, included scales, trills and arpeggios often played at break-neck speed.

Musically, the Romantic era focused on longer, more lyrical melodies, stark contrasts and several different musical ideas within a movement. It kept the homophonic sound of the Classical era but tended to use changes in tempo and time signatures to hold the listener's interest.

"The virtuoso would wow the audience with a display of skill"



Inspirational works

Top pieces from the Romantic era



Waltz in D-flat major, Op. 64 No. 1

Artist: Frédéric Chopin
Year: 1847

One of Chopin's most famous piano compositions. His distinct style fuses the simple harmonies of the Baroque period with the chromatic dynamism of the Romantic era, brought together in true virtuoso style.



Six Duets, Op. 11, No.4 - Valse

Artist: Sergei Rachmaninoff
Year: 1830

Grab a friend and have a go at playing this fast and furious duet from this Romantic legend. This show-stopping melody provides a fun and lyrical contrast to the sounds of many other composers at the time.



Sonata in E-Major, Op. 6

Artist: Felix Mendelssohn
Year: 1826

Every movement in this piece showcases Mendelssohn's talent for writing wonderfully expressive and fluid music that made him one of the most popular composers of the Romantic era.



Works for Piano Volume 2

Artist: Hans von Bülow (composer)
Mark Anderson (pianist)
Year: 2013 **Label:** Nimbus

An early student of the virtuoso Romantic pianist, Franz Liszt, Büllow is noted for his numerous renditions. However, this collection, proves he is a fantastic composer in his own right.

Claude Debussy

This legendary composer certainly makes an impression

The intricate, enchanting melodies of Claude-Achille Debussy (1862-1918) are still the source of inspiration for many pianists today. In the instantly recognisable piano solo, "Clair de Lune", chains of seventh, ninth and eleventh chords sweep dreamily across the keys, enriched with complex chromatic articulations. Debussy is often considered to be the founder of impressionism, a sub-genre within the Romantic movement in which the melody is designed to create images in the listener's head. He was also renowned for his use of tempo rubato, which involves slowing down or speeding up your playing freely to add to the imagery you wish to create.
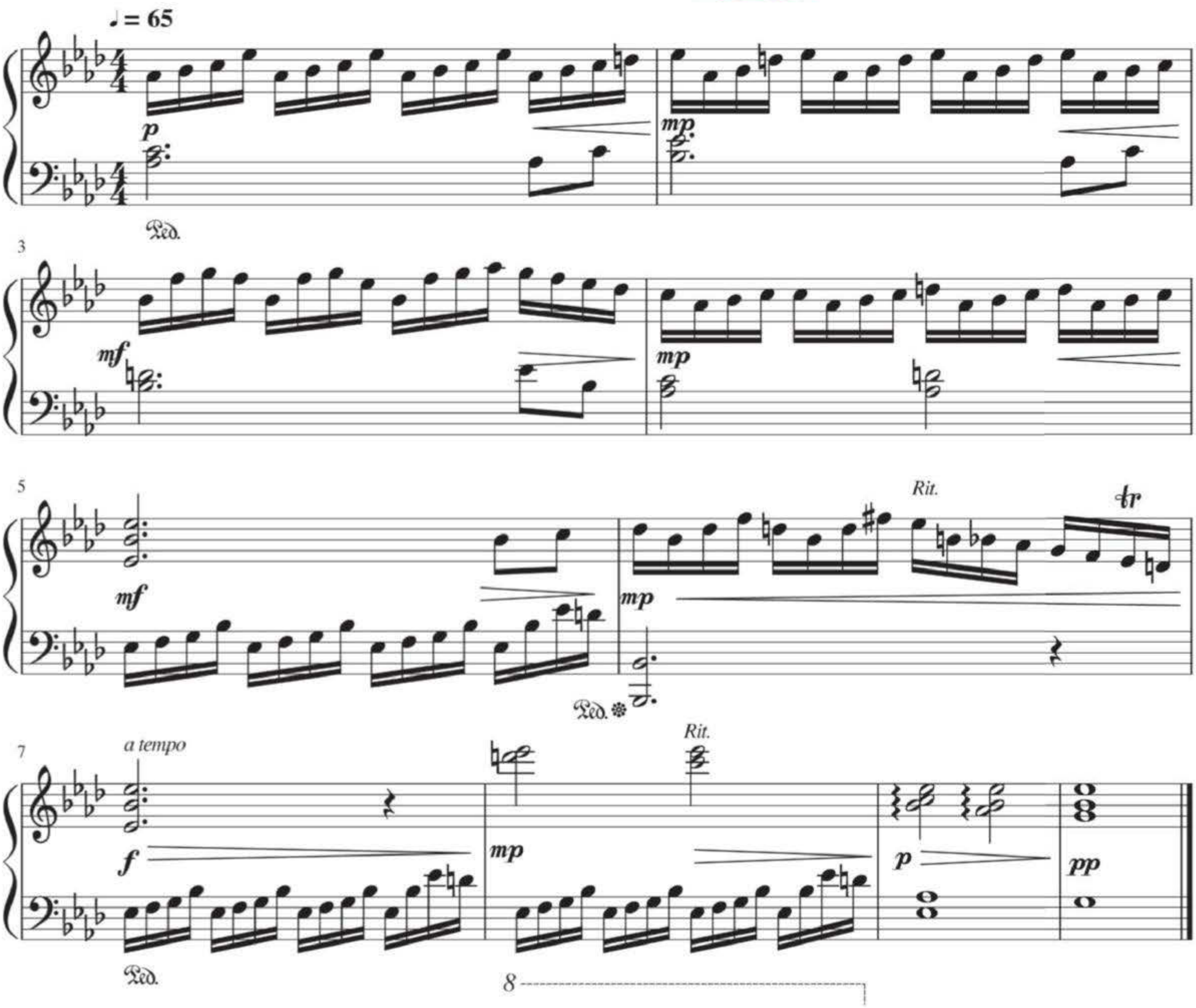


Top tip

Painstakingly particular pedalling

Debussy was very particular about the way pedalling should be used in his compositions. Try using both of the pedals at once in order to create the blurry, bell-like sound that is so characteristic of his work.

Give it a try

Enjoy the creativity of the Romantic period



Give it a try



Audio file
Listen to the audio files and follow along on your own keyboard

Contemporary piano music

Fusing classical and pop to create accessible yet beautiful songs

Although music purists would be loathe to label it classical, and the genre's fans wouldn't want to hear it be classified as straight-up pop, contemporary piano music tends to straddle the line between both genres and adds a bit of new age and world music into the mix. Compositions are often kept simple – especially when compared to the elaborate pieces performed in the Romantic era – and are usually based on accessible pop-like chord progressions, although just chords on their own are rarely used.

Instead, the right hand can use the pop influences to craft beautiful and accessible melodies that will appeal to many. Vocal tracks aren't often used in the genre, so the right hand can perform melodies similar to what a vocalist would sing in a pop song. The left hand often takes influence from the Classical period and usually plays arpeggios or Alberti bass patterns to accompany the melody rather than overpower it.

Just because the music is more simplistic and attracts a wide range of listeners doesn't mean that the pianists are any less skilled, though. It takes a great degree of expertise to craft a melody that will pull at a listener's heart strings like many of the genre's finest composers' works do. Check out South Korean pianist Yiruma's *River Flows In You* for an example of the contemporary piano music as its best – you'll find that the catchy melody and simple chord structures that define the genre are both present and correct.



"It takes expertise to craft a melody that will pull at a listener's heart strings"

Inspirational works

Check out these contemporary classics



Amélie

Artist: Yann Tiersen
Year: 2001 Label: Virgin Records

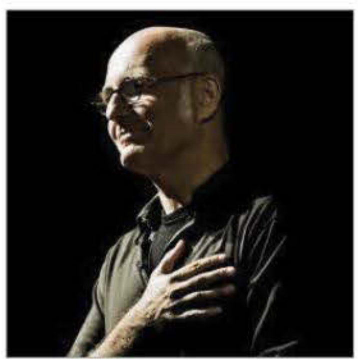
This intricate and diverse soundtrack album propelled Yann Tiersen to the level of global recognition he deserved. The piano solos "La valse d'Amélie" and "Comptine d'un autre été" showcase his delicate style of piano composition.



First Love

Artist: Yiruma
Year: 2001 **Label:** Stomp Music

Yiruma's simple and lyrical style of contemporary piano music provides the aspiring pianist with a smorgasbord of songs to learn. One of the most popular tracks on this hit album, "River Flows in You", is a great place to start.



I Giorni

Artist: Ludivico Einaudi
Year: 2001 **Label:** Dischi Ricordi S.p.A.

The title track of this album has been featured in numerous shows and adverts. Einaudi's distinctive sound is formed from incredibly simple, carefully constructed riffs, with heavy use of the sustain pedal creating a dreamy fluency.



Sophomore Jinx

Artist: Rob Costlow
Year: 2002 **Label:** Tourist Records

A great example of how the simple harmonic and rhythmic structures found within contemporary music, when played with enough emotion, can form such intricate and expressive pieces. Rob Costlow's style will sweep you off of your feet.

Fabrizio Paterlini

Heart-breakingly beautiful piano

Paterlini's delicate and minimalist style is guaranteed to bring out the inner romantic in anyone. From his earliest works, such as "Viaggi in Aeromobile", to his more recent albums such as "Autumn Stories", Paterlini's twinkling melodies and rumbling bass riffs are riddled with artistic intricacy and expressivity. In many of his recordings, Paterlini places the microphones very close to the wooden hammers. This creates a subtly deeper sound and unique tone, which picks up the vibrations of the strings and the percussive ring of the fingertips hitting the keys.

Top tip
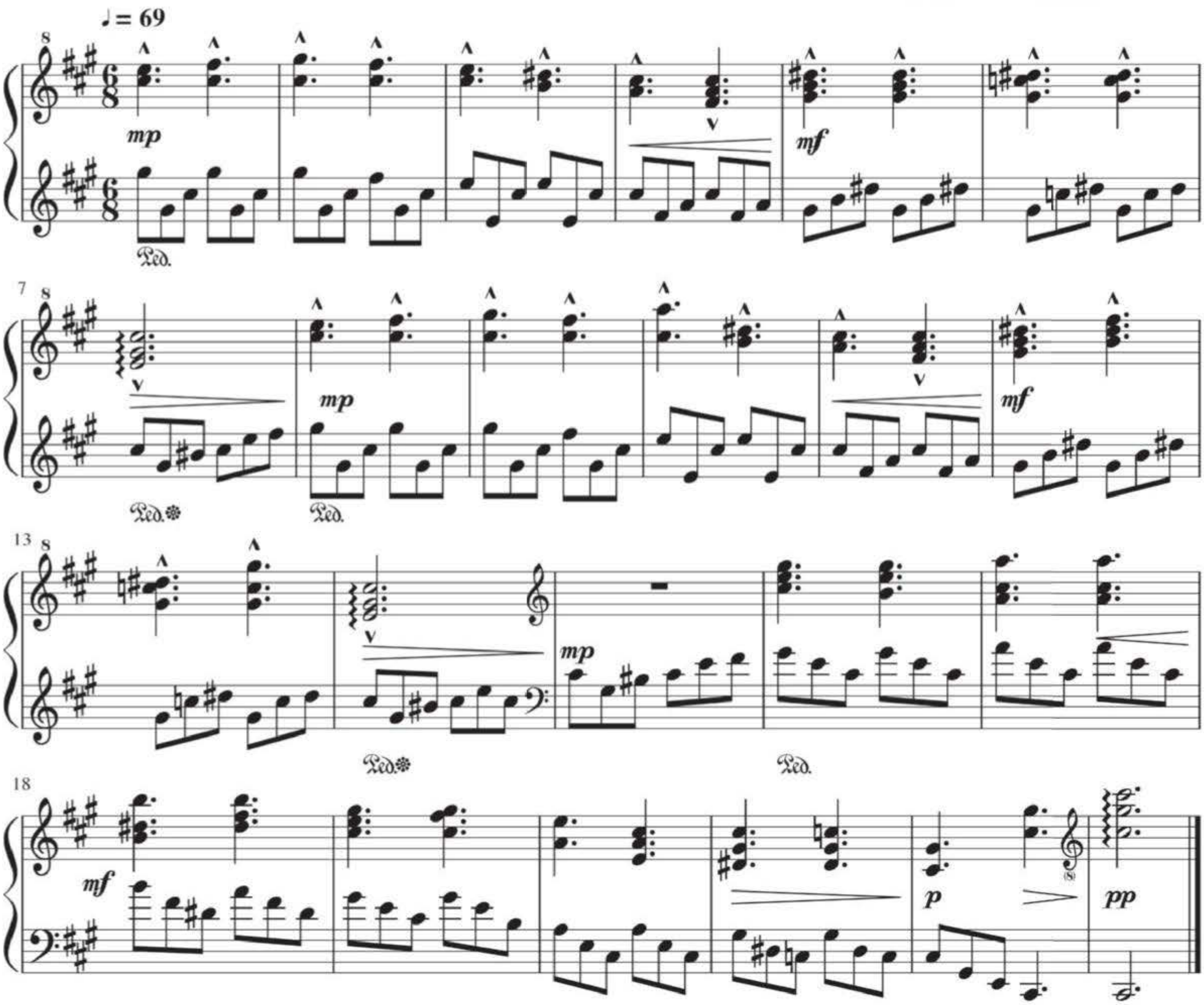
Express yourself

Bring repetitive melodies to life by concentrating less on the instructions in the score, and more on your own expression. Try swapping speeds, dabbling with dynamics and playing with the pedals to find your unique sound.



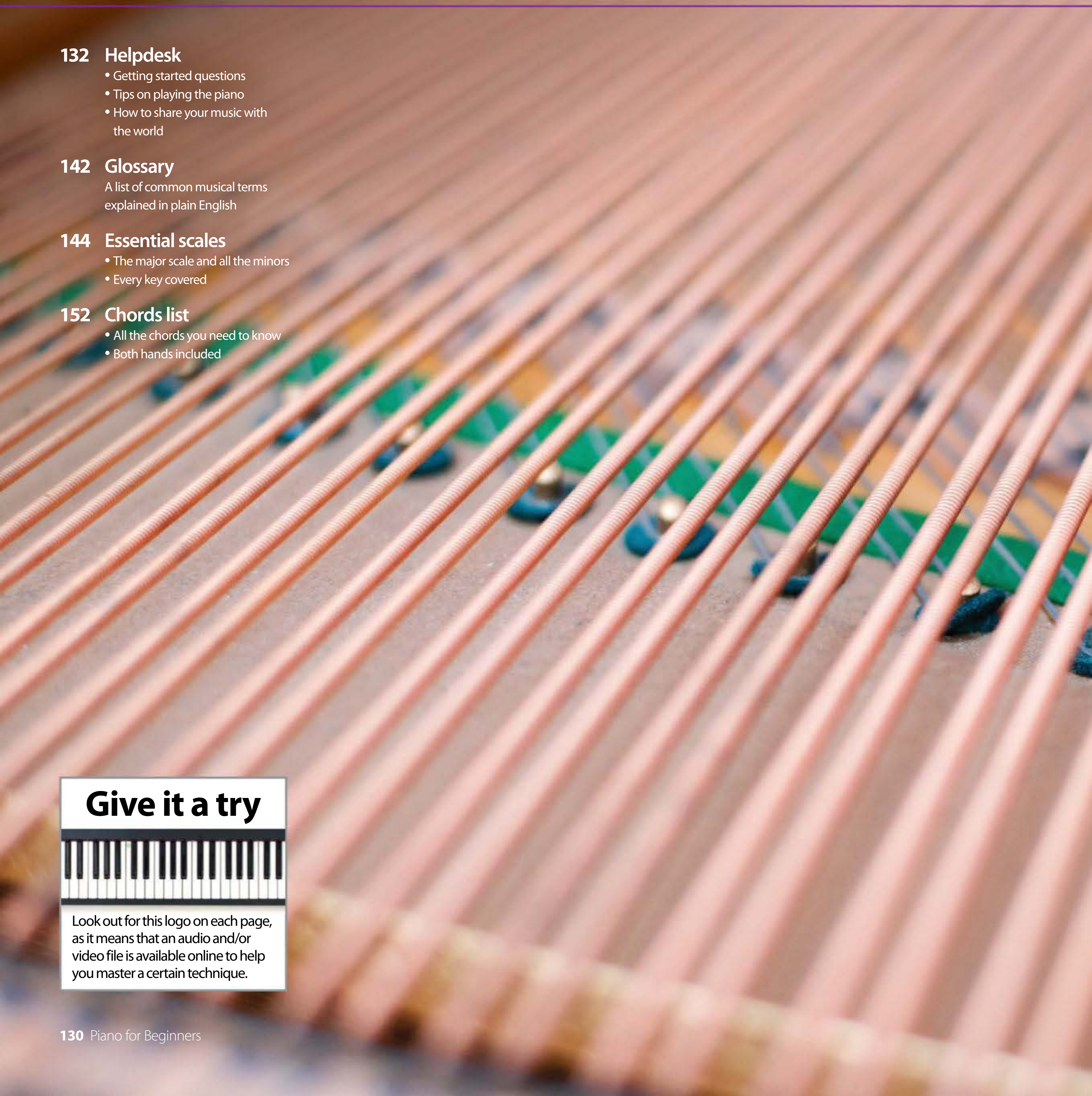
Give it a try

Mix styles for a contemporary result



Reference

Some final pointers to help you learn the piano: your common questions answered, a glossary and an essential chords and scales list



Give it a try

Look out for this logo on each page, as it means that an audio and/or video file is available online to help you master a certain technique.



“If you’re thinking about learning to play piano then you probably have loads of questions. Here we try to answer some of the more common queries”

Your questions answered

Getting started

If you're thinking about learning to play piano then you probably have loads of questions. Here we try to answer some of the more common queries

Timescale

I have no musical background and have recently considered buying a piano for the first time, so I was wondering how long it would take me to be able to play properly?

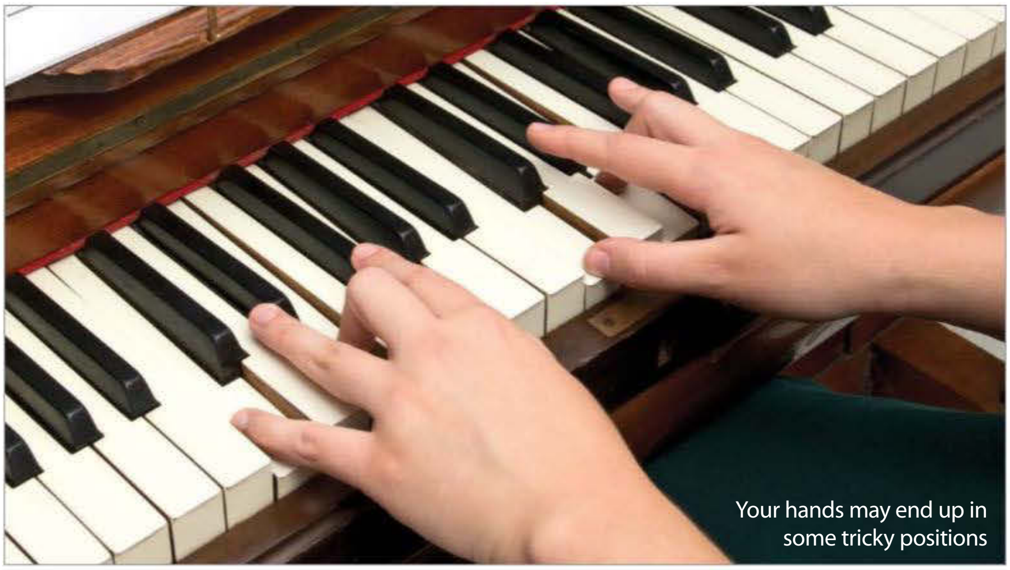
That all depends on how much time you are prepared to invest. In most cases you will be looking at years rather than months, but it also depends greatly on what you want to play as you can easily learn how to play a simple one-handed tune in a day or two. Playing more complex pieces requires a greater understanding of the instrument and we would recommend a series of lessons – at least until you pass through the various grades.

Some people say that the real learning, pleasure and musical development comes after about Grade eight. If you want to progress quickly you're going to need to practise at least 30 minutes to an hour a day, the more time you put in the better. It's also good to break up your practice times into smaller sessions throughout the day rather than one large chunk all at once. If you just want to play for yourself out of fun, you could expect to get to a pretty good level within two to three years. By that time you should be able to play things that really satisfy you, stuff that you can really enjoy. If you want to be a concert pianist, that will take decades and many hours of work to accomplish.

Does it hurt?

Will my hands and wrists hurt when I start playing piano? I'm worried about a repetitive strain injury and cramp…

Adopting the correct posture is essential when playing piano and, if done correctly, it's no more uncomfortable than using a computer keyboard. The important thing is to stay relaxed whenever you're playing and don't contort your hands into strange positions in order to play chords. If it hurts your hands reaching a particular chord then modify your position so that you can reach it more easily. You will also need to know the difference between long-term and short-term pain. When starting out your hands and arms will be in alien positions and some discomfort will inevitably be felt as you adopt and become used to playing your instrument. Staying relaxed and playing with a softer touch will help ensure that the amount of strain on your arms is reduced. If you do start to suffer discomfort then consult a doctor for the best course of action.

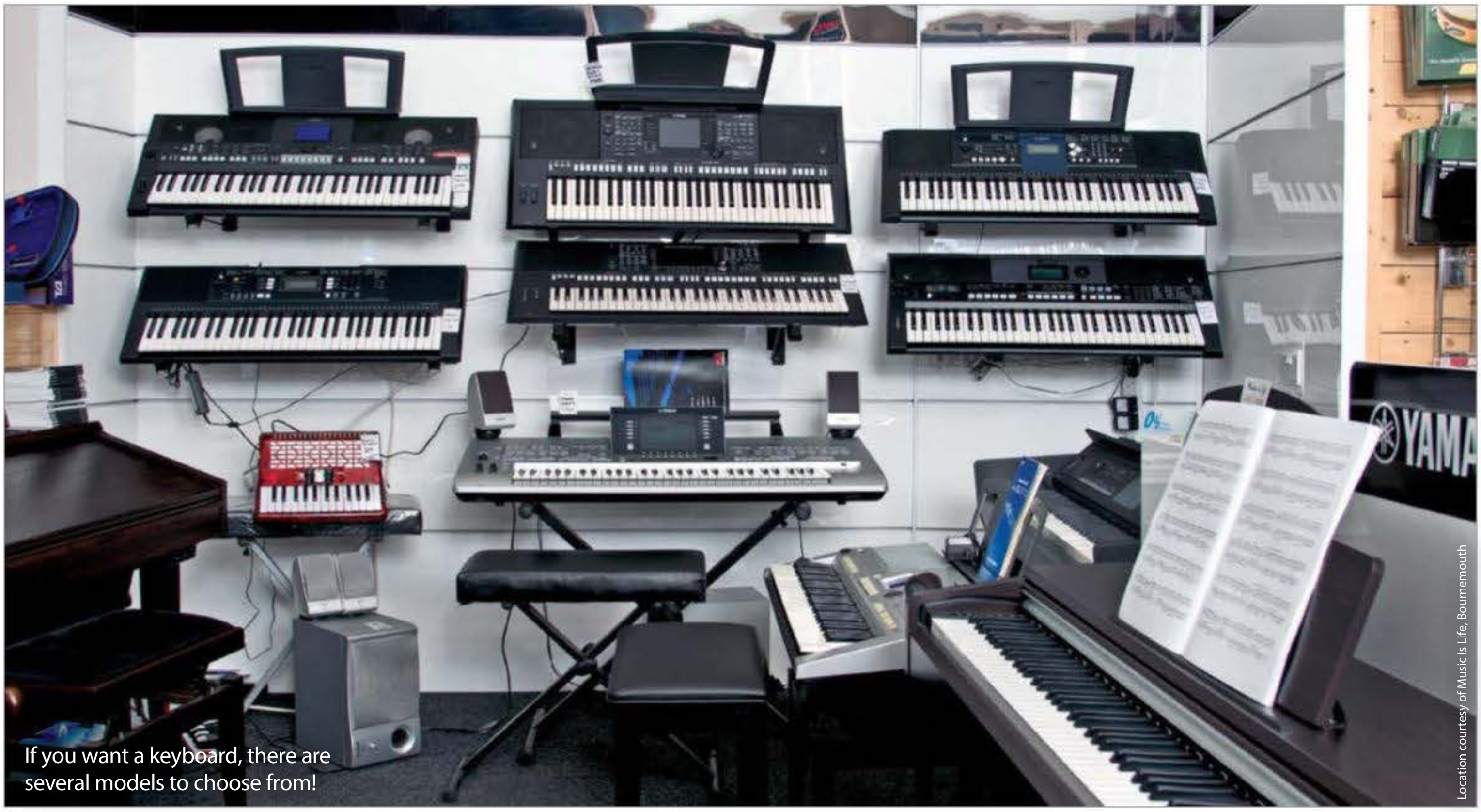

Your hands may end up in some tricky positions


Choose your piano wisely

Keyboard or piano?

Should I learn to play on an acoustic piano, digital piano or a keyboard?

When starting out, it is far cheaper to go for a keyboard as, unlike real pianos, these will never need tuning, take up much less space and be considerably cheaper than a real piano. If you're really serious about learning the piano, have the money and have the space, then invest in a piano because the experience will be so much more to savour. However, there are many good keyboard and digital piano alternatives to suit any budget from around £200 upwards so browse the internet and see what models are around that best suit your circumstances.



If you want a keyboard, there are several models to choose from!

Location courtesy of Music Is Life, Bournemouth

Early pitfalls

Are there any common problems that new learners encounter?

The biggest problem is frustration at not moving ahead as quickly as you would hope and consequently becoming demotivated and losing interest. To keep yourself motivated it's good to experiment and have fun with the piano away from having to conform to the rigidity of what's already out there on the sheet music. Exploring the keys and the notes that they play on your own terms will allow you to get to know the instrument better and you can then start piecing together your own songs. Everyone, even the virtuoso players, had to start somewhere, so just imagine that music doesn't exist and that you're the first person to pick up – not literally – the instrument! If you do want to concentrate on playing existing songs then concentrate on simple ones and then have fun adding your own little musical embellishments to the composition – there really are no rules.

Best for learners

What type of piano/keyboard is most suitable for learners? What should I look out for when considering which piano to buy?

On a full-size piano there are 88 keys, so look out for the number of keys on any models you're thinking about buying to see if you get the whole experience. Some keyboards only offer 64 keys.

> "The biggest problem is frustration at not moving ahead as quickly as you would hope and consequently becoming demotivated"

Obviously it is better to have the full scale of keys, whether you're learning or otherwise, and that they're also of a decent size so that you don't hit the wrong key by mistake. The only other things to consider are the space it is likely to take up and the cost – so just scout around, weigh up your options and go for the one that suits you best.

Keep the beat

I have read about using a metronome while practising. What is a metronome and how can it help my playing?

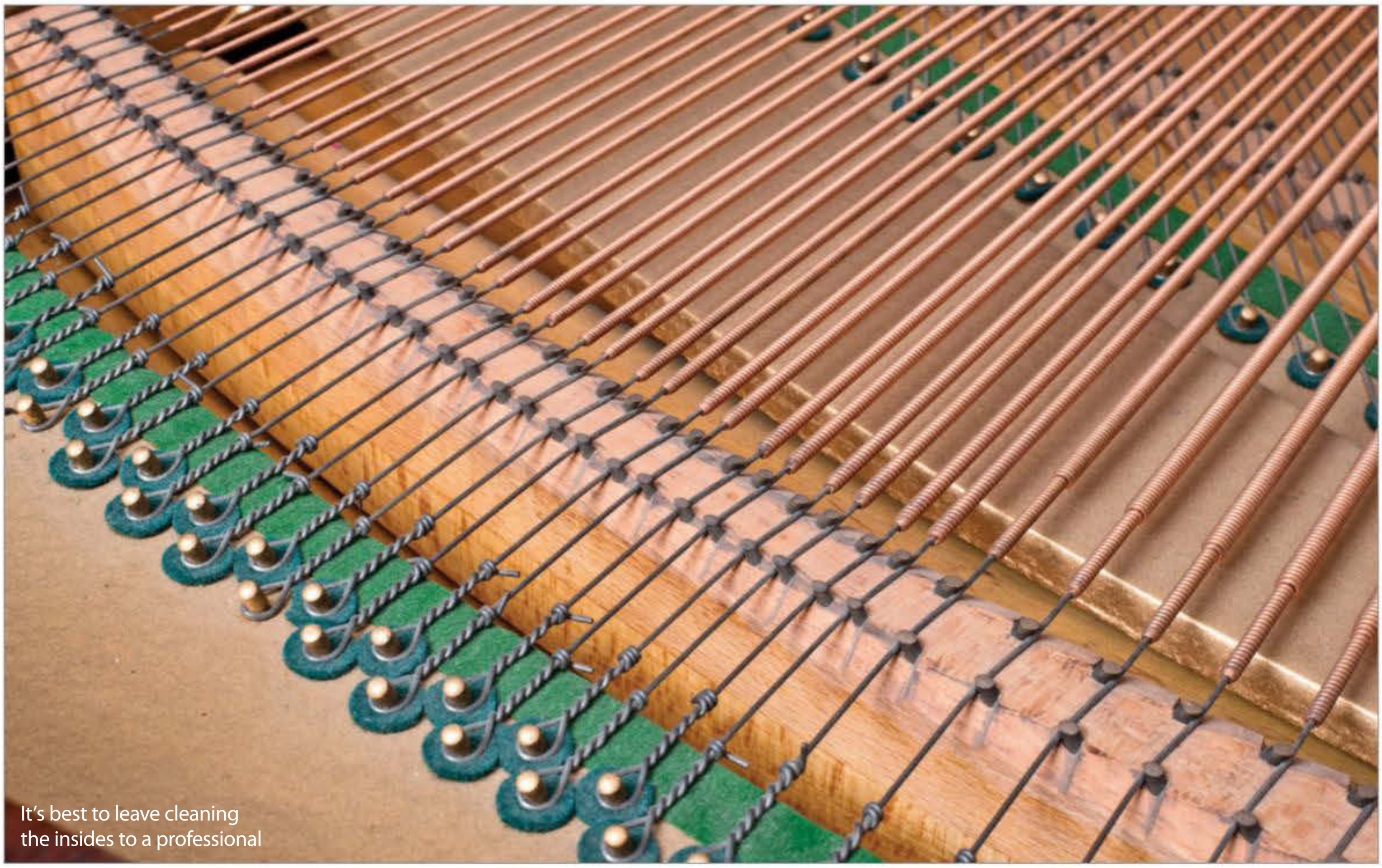
A metronome is a device that holds the perfect beat by producing regular ticks or beats. This is a useful tool to have to hand when you need to practise at a certain tempo or whenever you're trying to increase your speed on the keys. The tempo of a metronome is measured in Beats per Minute (BPM) and metronomes come in three forms – mechanical, electrical and software. A traditional metronome is a triangular device that holds a metal ticker that you wind up and it boasts a slider through which you can adjust the speed.

Most modern metronomes are electronic, but follow the same basic principle and use electronics and quartz crystal to maintain the beat. Metronomes are useful for practising scales and increasing your speed through them. You may only be able to play a scale at 150bpm at present, but by practising with a metronome and increasing the tempo at which you practise every day with, say 5bpm, you will gradually train your fingers and brain to play quicker and quicker, which is immensely satisfying. If you have a keyboard or a modern digital piano, you may have a metronome built in to the hardware.

Play time

I would like to learn some popular songs. Could you recommend some easy ones?

Easiest is definitely best when starting out, and the beauty of simple ditties such as *Mary Had A Little Lamb*, *Frere Jacques* and *Jingle Bells* is that you undoubtedly know the songs so well already that you won't even need sheet music to play them, you can just steadily find the right notes by ear and then keep practising until you are able to play them seamlessly and at a high tempo. When you have achieved this then you can start branching out into more complex pieces and your musical journey will continue…


It's best to leave cleaning the insides to a professional

Your piano

In order to play piano, you have to get to know your instrument inside and out to know what makes it tick. Here we introduce you to the intricacies

Get in tune

I was recently given an old piano as a gift, but when I play it it sounds out of tune. How would I go about tuning it? Is it something I can do myself?

We wouldn't recommend tuning it yourself – at least not to begin with. To tune a piano you have to make minute adjustments to the tensions of the strings to properly align the intervals between their tones so that the instrument is in tune. Unlike, say, tuning a guitar, piano tuning is not simply a particular fixed set of pitches. Fine tuning a piano requires an assessment of the interaction among notes, which is different for every piano and as such requires slightly different pitches. Pianos are tuned to a modified version of a system called 'equal temperament', where every pitch may be derived from its relationship to a chosen fixed pitch. It's a complicated process and is best carried out by a trained technician, but you can acquire the tools and carry out the process yourself further down the line as you get to know your instrument more and are au fait with the tones that it creates. Depending on use, a piano should be retuned twice a year.

Pedal power

My keyboard only has a sustain pedal. Is this something that will hamper my progress in the future?

Not really, because if you're a serious enough player to know about the pedals and the various effects that they afford your sound then you will probably be ready to buy a proper acoustic piano anyway. Pianos traditionally have three pedals, which are (from left to right) soft pedal, the sostenuto pedal and the sustaining pedal. The soft pedal (una corda) creates a softer tone by shifting the mechanism to the right so that the hammers hit one string instead of two. The middle pedal allows pianists to sustain selected notes, while others remain unaffected. The name of this pedal is slightly misleading as 'sostenuto' is Italian for 'sustained' and would lead us to think that it performs the same task as the sustaining pedal. However, the sostenuto was

> "A piano should be kept from exterior walls, drafty windows and doors, fireplaces and air vents; and ensure it is sat on a rug or carpet"


Make sure you're comfortable before playing

originally called the 'tone-sustaining' pedal, which better reflects what it does – sustainment of a single or group of tones. Which leads us onto the sustaining (or damper) pedal. This right-hand pedal raises all of the dampers off the strings so that they keep vibrating after a key has been released, adding more expression to the notes by allowing them to resonate and making it possible to string harmonies and notes together. Having a sustain pedal alone should in no way hamper or restrict your playing further down the line.

Sit comfortably

My piano didn't come with a stool or seat. I have a variety of chairs around the house, but they're all of different heights. How should I be sat relative to the piano? Does it matter if I'm sat close to the floor?

Seating is an important factor in good piano playing and both the height and distance away from the instrument need to be taken into consideration. The best height to be seated at will allow the elbow and upper arm to fall freely from the shoulder and allows the forearm to be parallel to the floor when the forearm and hand are in their natural shape (as they are when they're hanging by your side). The optimum distance to be seated at is a distance that allows our elbows to rest slightly in front of our central line when our hands are in their neutral position on the keyboard, with our hands in front of the elbows (not in front of the body or at strange angles to the instrument).

Cleaning instructions

I've recently been given a second-hand piano that hasn't been played for a while, and as such it's a bit dusty. How do you go about cleaning the instrument? Are there any products you definitely shouldn't use?

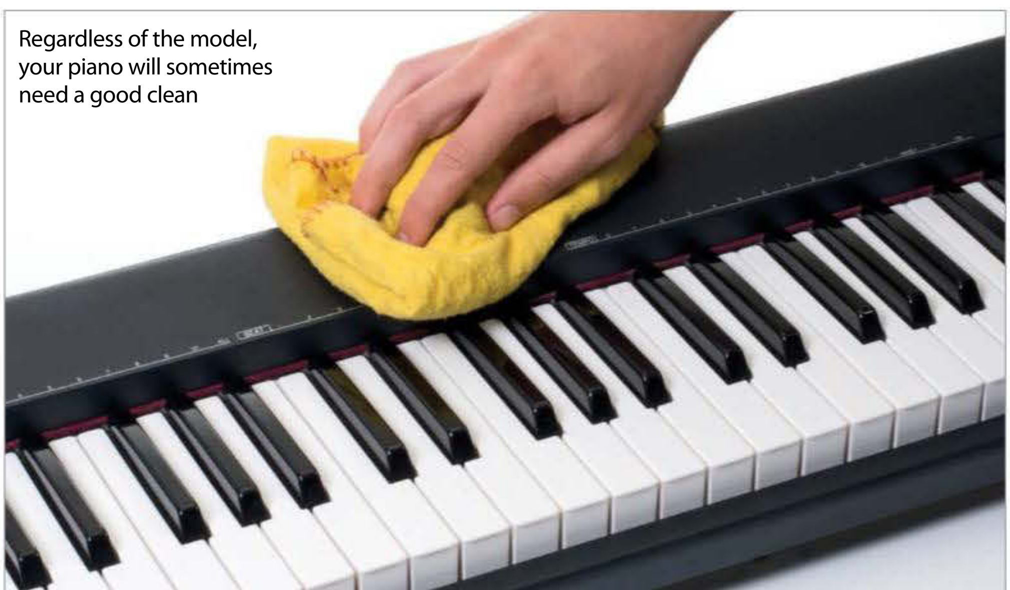
If you need to polish your piano, you can use special piano polish, which can be bought from most music stores. Ideally, you should remove surface dust with a feather duster and never polish the keys with a dry cloth as you may end up scratching the surface. If you do dust it with a cloth, avoid rags or paper towels and use fabric-softened flannel or chamois. Ensure that the cloth is slightly damp using filtered water (certain minerals can alter the surface), use gentle motions and never be tempted to clean inside the piano – leave that bit to the professionals. As a general rule, don't place any objects on top of your piano, at least not without a soft piece of felt or cloth placed between the two.

"Don't place any objects on your piano, at least not without a soft piece of felt or cloth placed between the two"

Storage solutions

I've bought a second-hand upright piano, but I don't know where to put it! Should I keep it away from sunlight? Does it matter if it's against an outside wall?

If you own an acoustic piano then the ideal room temperature for where it is stationed should be 21-22 degrees C (70-72° F). Going much higher or lower will affect the tuning, possibly weaken the internal glue and contribute to long-term damage to the wood. Also, a piano should be kept from exterior walls, drafty windows and doors, fireplaces and air vents; and ensure it is sat on a rug or carpet. The more expensive the piano, the more care you have to take, but these guidelines will help ensure and preserve the wellbeing of any make or model.


Regardless of the model, your piano will sometimes need a good clean



Learning to read music is a worthwhile challenge

Playing the piano

Now that you know your instrument and the basics of playing, it's time to get more technical and start exploring the meaning of music…

Reading music

I'm a complete musical novice who has just picked up a cheap keyboard. Is there any way I can get by playing the piano without learning to read music?

Yes, you can learn to play by ear – in fact there are highly accomplished pianists who can't read a note, but by not being able to read music you will perhaps be doing yourself and your instrument a disservice. It doesn't actually take very long to be able to read music and modern technology can help you out a great deal by providing various tuition apps as well as flashcards that you can use to ram the knowledge home. By learning to read music you will be able to enjoy playing centuries of great and popular songs, which in turn will heighten your understanding of your instrument and what it is capable of and improve your playing no end.

Music jargon

I'm struggling with some music terminology – what are chords, scales and arpeggios?

Well, let's start off with chords. Piano chords – like chords on a guitar – are groups of notes, usually three or four, that are played together to create one, true sound. For example, if you play the C, E and G keys together on your piano then you will have just played a C major chord (shortened to the C chord). Arpeggios are notes that form a chord played individually in sequence either going up or going down the scale. Successfully playing an arpeggio requires the player to play the sounds of a chord individually to differentiate the notes. An arpeggio in the key of C major going up two octaves would be played as C, E, G, C, E, G. Scales are groups of notes that act as a foundation for a part or full piece of music. Scales give the composer a structure from which to build melodies and harmonies and it actually helps musicians to improvise a piece of music. The most popular scale is the major scale (which you may know as 'Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti').

> "By learning to read music you'll be able to enjoy playing popular songs, which will heighten your understanding of your instrument"

Nail it

I like to grow my fingernails quite long – will this be an issue when playing piano?

Possibly. The optimum length of the fingernails when playing the piano is a contentious issue that may depend a great deal on how you are playing – for example the way your fingers rest on the keys. You will want your fingers to slide across the keys as effortlessly as possible and so obviously overtly long nails may affect this.

Likewise, you don't want your fingers to sit too flat on the keys as this may lead to discomfort over time. You may also find that long nails create an annoying clicking sound as they hit the keys as you play, so our advice would be that if you are serious about learning how to play the piano, you should definitely consider cutting them so that they lie in line with the tips of your fingers.

Grace notes

I have heard of the term 'grace notes'. What are they and how do they show up on sheet music?

Grace notes are notations used in writing music that appear much smaller than regular notes and denote sounds that are shorter than full notes. Think of grace notes as ornaments that have no significant value of their own, but when placed in a line of music they give it more depth by acting as embellishments that are there to make the piece of music sound fuller and more accomplished. A grace note is indicated by a smaller-than-normal note that sometimes has a slash going through the note stem. If no slash is present then this is an appoggiatura (where the principle note is suspended and the grace note doesn't have to conform to the rigid timing of the piece) and if a slash is present then we can interpret it as an acciaccatura (which is a shortened version of the appoggiatura), where the grace note sounds for a shorter length of time.

Improvisation time

I'm growing a bit bored of playing sheet music, and would love to play something a bit more spontaneous. Do you have any tips for beginner improvisation?

Yes, although we must stress that having the knowledge of a variety of sheet music will undoubtedly make the act of improvisation much easier. However, if you are determined to take a tinkle, freestyle, then make sure that you know about scales. Start with one that doesn't have too many sharps or flats, like D major, and practise it using your dominant hand and then switch to the other hand to build confidence. Next, learn about chords – especially the triad chords as these consist of only three notes. Now you can sit down and practise hitting notes of the same key. Have your left hand play the accompaniment (slow block or broken chords) in the same key and have your right hand play the melody. Switch keys once you become better at it to give the piece a broader, deeper feel. Another method is to play a slow 4/4 piece with each measure getting one chord on the left hand. With the right hand, improvise the melody within that chord and then switch to a different chord and continue the melody in the next chord. Keep doing this and see where it takes you.

Piano tabs

I've seen note names written with both the letter and a number, like C5. What does this mean?

It exists as a way of differentiating between notes of the same name. By giving each key on the keyboard a name and a number, there can be no confusion over which key someone means. The first key on a full-size keyboard is A0, while Middle C – the fourth C from left to right – is called C4. If you were to read 'Play C-D-G', this could mean any C, D, and G on the keyboard. However, 'Play C4-D4-G3' refers to specific notes, so using letters and numbers makes it easier to get your point across.

Note names

Are there any other names for the different musical notes than crotchet, minim, etc? I keep seeing whole notes and half notes being referenced – what do they mean?

You don't need to worry – they aren't a brand new set of notes you need to learn! Whole notes, half notes, quarter notes and eighth notes are the American counterparts to semibreves, minims, crotchets, and quavers respectively. Aside from the names, there aren't any other differences between the way they work, so if you're confused you just need to substitute the names you know for the ones you don't.

> "Whole notes, half notes, quarter notes and eighth notes are the American counterparts to semibreves, minims, crotchets and quavers"



If you're struggling, a friend can be an incredible help

> "A decent desktop mic can be picked up for around £25/$39, or your computer may even have one built in"





On-screen keyboards are useful features!

Recording

Professional studio recording will be out of reach for most beginners, but you can get great results by recording at home

Digital acoustic recording

I love playing my upright piano, and I want to record some tracks with it. However, I want to edit them using a computer and obviously I can't plug the piano into my machine directly because there are no inputs. How can I record acoustically on the computer?

It really depends on your budget. The cheapest option would be to buy a USB desktop mic and plug it into your computer. Make sure you stick the mic near to the piano (but not so close that you get a horrible bassy sound) and record what the mic hears into your favourite digital audio workstation, like GarageBand, Logic or Audacity. A decent desktop mic can be picked up for around £25/$39, or your computer may have one built in (but keep in mind you won't have much flexibility of movement in this case).

Another option is to use a USB audio interface with a built-in mic. If you use a Mac, the Apogee ONE can be bought for around £120/$180 second hand and comes recommended. The method of recording your upright or grand piano is the same, but you will notice a great difference in the quality.

Mix it up

What is mixing, and is it important?

After you've finished recording all your piano and backing tracks, you will need to mix them together to make it sound good, usually into a two-channel stereo. The bad news is that entire books have been written on this topic, so it's not an easy matter to get to grips with. To start with, you should edit the volume of each individual track until you're happy with the sound they all make. Once you've got that, you can start to pan your tracks to the left or right speaker if you feel it adds to the mix.

Tablet recording

Is recording using an iPad really a viable option for a decent result?

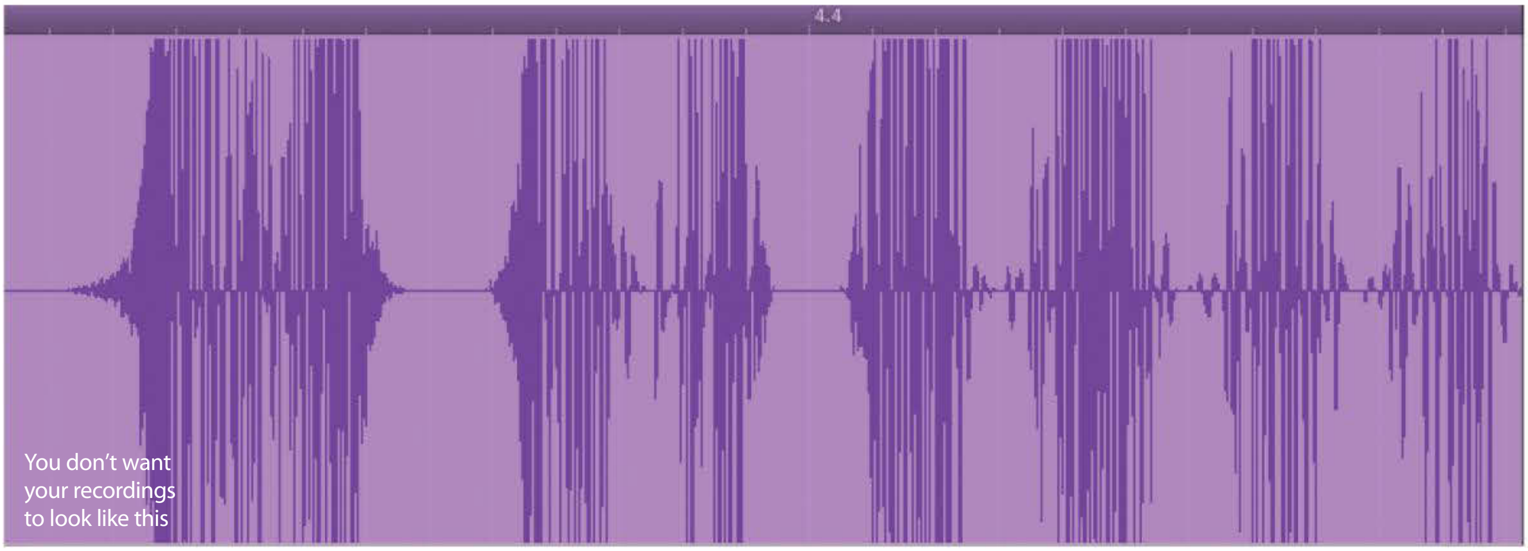
It certainly is, but you will need your fair share of apps and accessories for it to work, like the iRig MIDI that we covered earlier in this book. Many popular artists are using iOS's diverse range of music apps to create great sounds for their albums, but few are recording their entire record on the tablet.

The iPad does have a few things going in its favour, though. One is its portability, which means it can be taken anywhere with your music still on it. If you want to lay down a track on the move then there's no better way of doing so, and iCloud support means you can carry on where you left off when you get home.

Backing tracks

My playing is improving, and I feel I'm ready to join a band and record for a bigger sound. However, I'm struggling to join one, and I'm living in a small apartment (even smaller with my digital piano), so I have no room for other instruments. Can I make a backing track for my piano using a computer?

Most definitely! In fact, these days, it's far easier and cheaper to record synthesised instruments on a



You don't want your recordings to look like this

> "If you're recording through a microphone, make sure it's not too close to the piano or keyboard, or you may get unwanted distortion"

computer. All you need are some instrument plug-ins, many of which can be freely downloaded from the internet. If you're on Windows, you will probably want a VST; if you're on Mac, you'll want a VST or AU (audio unit). How you install these plug-ins depends on your audio editor, so search the program's help files for assistance.

When your plug-in is installed, you can use a MIDI keyboard to play what you're looking for. If you don't have a MIDI keyboard, then don't worry, as many editors enable you to control the VST with your computer keyboard. It must be said, however, that digital instruments are in no way a substitute for the real deal, but they do help those of us with limited resources.

Sounding different

I just nailed the perfect take on my piano, but it sounds dreadful when I play it back – what am I doing wrong?

The solution is usually a lot simpler than you may think. If you're recording through a microphone, make sure it's not too close to the piano or keyboard, or you may get an unwanted distortion effect. Also, be sure to check the volume of the track on the computer – if it's +10dB it probably won't sound right.

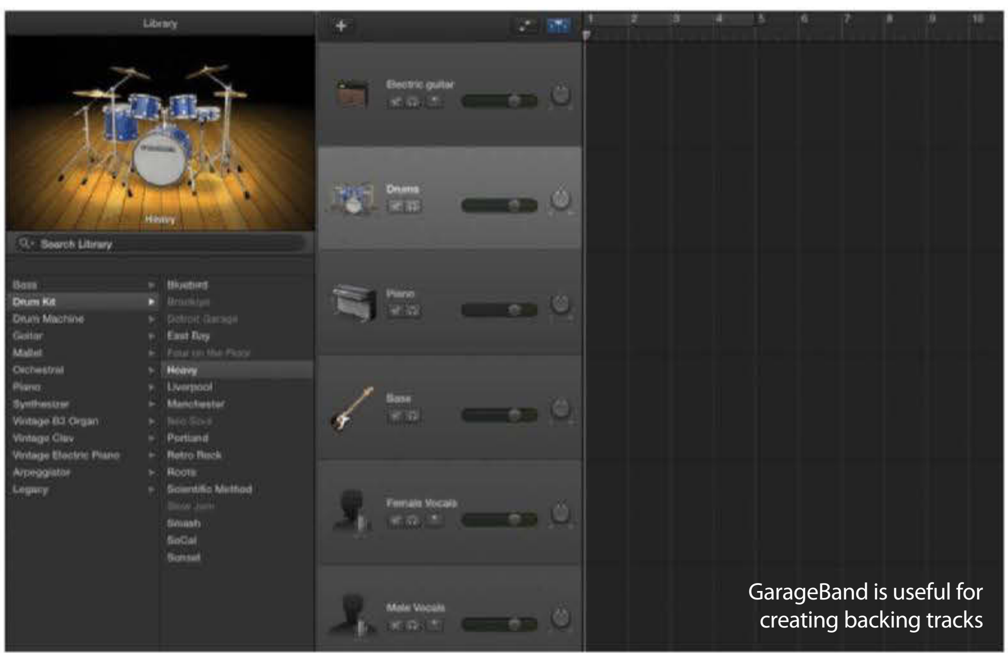
In many recording programs, you can opt to monitor your instrument through headphones as you go. This way you can hear what your recording will sound like. Also, this will mean you can listen to a backing track without the mic picking it up. If you don't wear headphones yet still monitor your piano, you run the risk of creating cacophonous feedback, which will definitely be captured by the microphone!

Virtual effects wizard

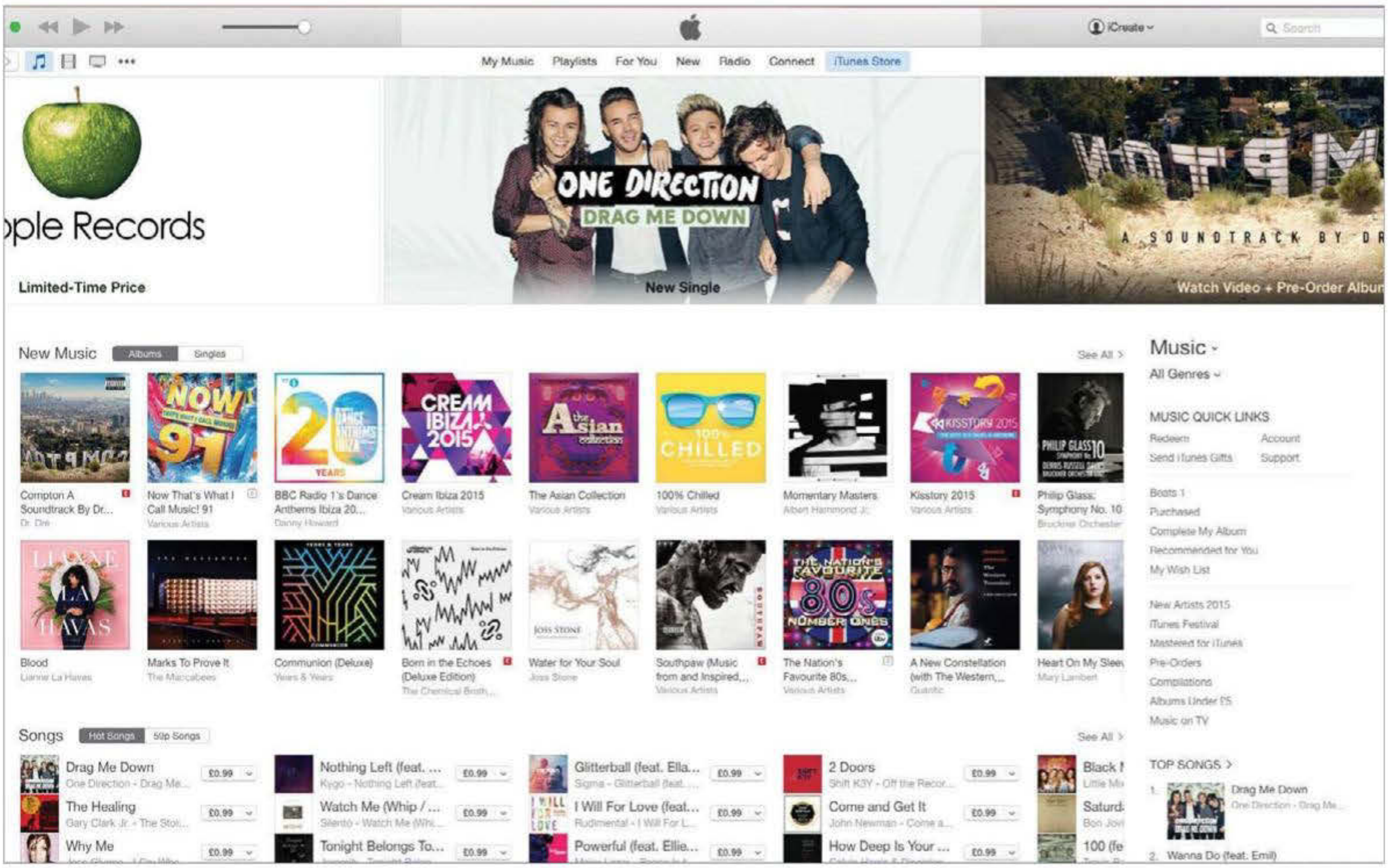
I don't want to spend lots of money on a high-end keyboard, but I still want to record my digital piano with some funky effects. Is this possible?

We've already mentioned how VST instruments can enhance your sound, but now here's where VST effects come in handy. Whether you just want to add a subtle reverb effect or a crazy synth sound, these plug-ins have got you covered. Like the instruments, VST installing methods will vary depending on your audio editor, but it will likely be a similar process. Many VSTs will have multiple settings, but it is down to you to select the best ones, as there are several variables that affect the sound. Make sure you save once you've found the perfect settings.

However, just because you can use these effects on your computer doesn't mean that you should. For instance, if you ever plan on playing live, it is a far better idea to invest in a keyboard as it's not exactly easy to change effects halfway through a song if you've got to run to your computer and click a few buttons! They are, however, perfect if you want to sit down and record some tracks on your computer using interesting sounds.



GarageBand is useful for creating backing tracks



Sharing

As you create music, you may wish to share it with others – but how do you go about doing so?

Feedback needed

I've recorded a few basic passages and played them to my friends. They're really into them, but I want to get more feedback on them before I develop the pieces into a full song. What's the best way to do this?

The internet makes it relatively easy to obtain feedback on your work. You could upload the riff to a forum that specialises in the genre of music you play, but these are often frequented by advanced amateurs and professionals, so their advice may not be too helpful if you're a beginner. A better bet would be to find beginner-focused websites and forums, as these will contain many like-minded individuals willing to help out and provide feedback. They'll also be able to offer feedback on your recording methods as well as your playing, so you can improve in several key areas. If you receive constructive negative feedback, make sure you use it to improve your recordings.

Upload a song

Are there any good websites to upload a song to? I want the world to hear, but I don't want to spend anything in the process.

You're in luck, as there are several! The one that we would recommend is SoundCloud, which is a fantastic website to share your music on and it continues to grow. Although it has many premium pricing options (from €29 to €500 a year), the free service gives you two hours of music to upload, so unless you're a songwriting maniac, you probably won't run out any time soon!

You can either share your track to every social networking service under the sun, or you can opt to share it to a SoundCloud group. If you share it to a group, make sure you pick one with interests similar to your genre, as you'll get far more listens that way. Listeners can also favourite and comment on your track. As well as uploading your songs, you can also networking with fellow musicians, picking up tips and tricks along the way. It's a very useful website to build contacts and initiate collaborations.

A slightly more surprising option to get your songs on the web for free is YouTube, the video sharing website. You can just upload audio to the site. Once your track is uploaded, add it as a video response to a popular track that's similar to yours. This will ensure you get some listens and likes, and hopefully some extra fans!

Up for sale

How can I get my work up for sale on the big digital distribution services like iTunes and Spotify? I'm working on writing an album and I want to know that when I'm done I can make some money from it!

You're best off looking at services like CD Baby and TuneCore, which will upload your music to all the major players in digital distribution, like iTunes, Amazon MP3 and Spotify, as well as selling it on

their own site. Some services will charge a one-off fee and take a cut off each sale, while others will charge a yearly fee and let you keep all the profits. It's worth gauging how many copies you think your work will sell before making this decision – make sure you have arrive at a conservative estimate!

However, once your music is on these services, the real work begins. Because of their insane popularity, it's highly unlikely that people will just stumble upon your music. You'll need to consider using social networking services like Twitter and Facebook to get the news out there.

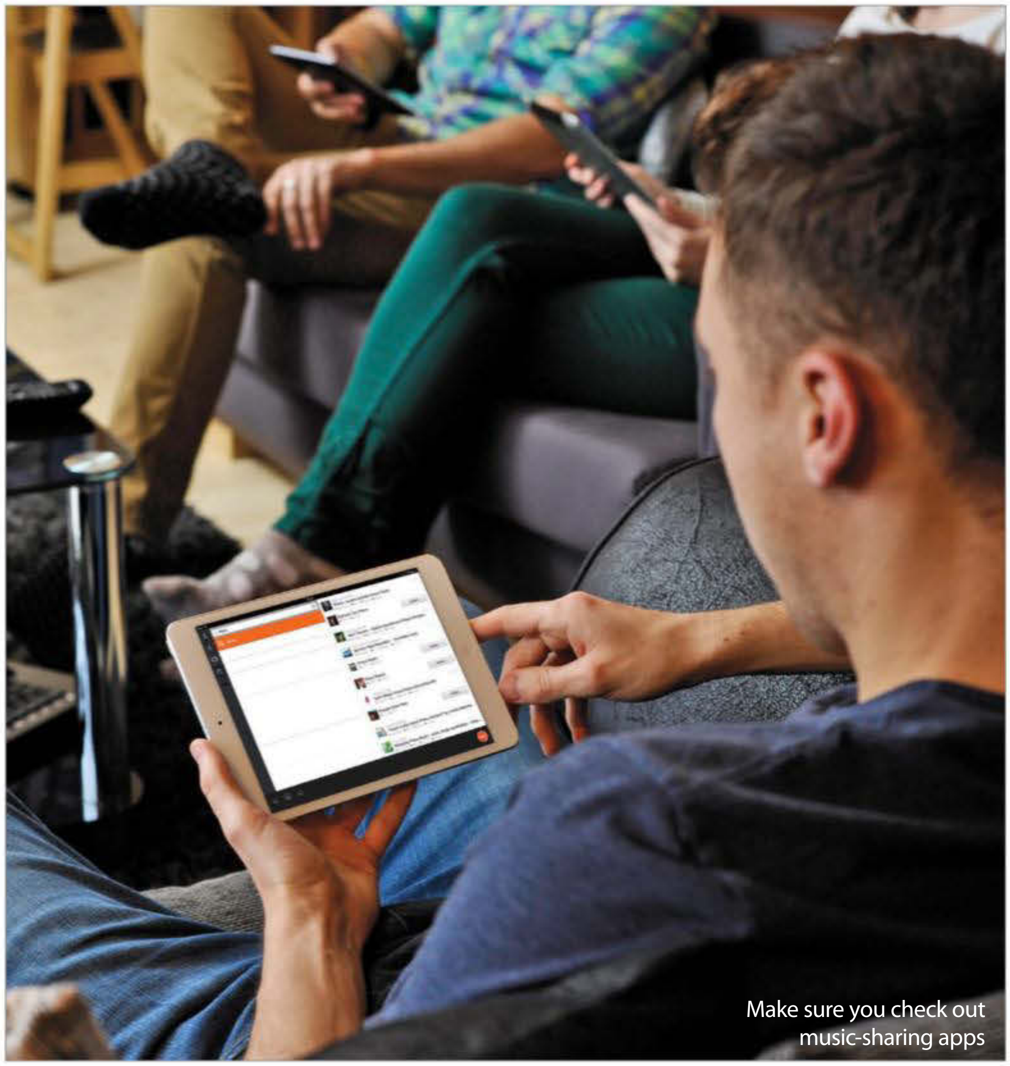
Getting heard

I know internet radio is incredibly popular, so how can I get my music on a station? I know I won't be able to get on national radio, but there are so many stations out there and I'd love to be played on one.

Instead of sending your demo on tape into DJs like in the old days, there are a few websites that enable to you upload your music for the chance to be on their radio. One such site is **http://amazingtunes.com**. By uploading your music, you stand the chance of being played on their very own Amazing Radio, which is on digital radio. It doesn't matter what genre you play either, as they have DJs that specialise in indie, ambient, folk and loads more in between.

If you get selected to be played, you'll receive an email from the DJ telling you what show you'll be on – so be sure to tell everyone you know and everyone they know to listen in! Besides those people that you do tell, you'll never know who else might be listening.

Internet radio hosts are always looking for new music, so don't be afraid to send your tunes into them. In the digital age, all it takes is a quick email with a song attached. To maximise your chances of gaining radio exposure, make sure you pick a station that is similar to your style. If you just throw your work at any station, you'd not only be wasting your time, but the listeners' time too!



Make sure you check out music-sharing apps

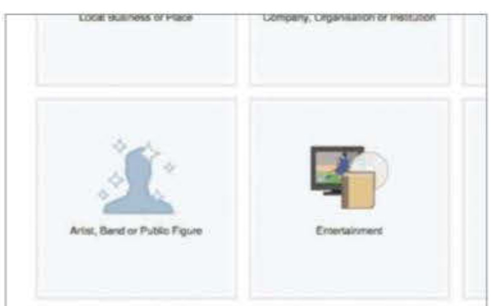
"Find beginner-focused websites and forums, as these will contain many like-minded individuals willing to help out and provide feedback"

Facebook fans

How can I get my band and music on Facebook? I want fans not friends!



Sign in to your Facebook account at **www.facebook.com**, or sign up with the green button.



Go to the Create Page link on the left and choose Artist, Band or Public Figure from the options.



Add your information and a profile picture to create your band's page! You can then edit it.

Glossary

A

Accidental
These are small symbols within the music that alert the player that they need to alter a note into a sharp or a flat or a natural.

Arpeggio
A collection of notes in a chord, played one by one up or down the keyboard, instead of at the same time as you would play a full chord.

Articulations
Articulations tell you to play each note in a particular style, expressed by little symbols near the note. Some of these include:

• Staccato
To play in a clipped, short fashion, shown by a small dot either above or below a note.

• Legato
To smoothly slur the notes together, shown by curved lines which link notes.

• Accent
Tells you to add some extra oomph to a note, shown with a right-facing 'open-wedge' shape.

B

Bar
Divide the stave into measured sections. Each measure ties in with the time signature, for example in 4/4 time, each bar will contain four crotchet/quarter note beats.

Beat
A measured unit of time in a piece of music. The time signature organises the number of beats per bar and also dictates the length of a beat. The speed of the beat is dictated by the song's tempo.

C

Chord
A chord is a group of notes, usually three or four, played all at the same time.

Clef
The symbol right at the start of each stave. It tells you which pitch to allocate to the notes of the stave.

D

Dynamics
Instructions within the music relating to its volume. They will be in the form of symbols (such as a crescendo) or Italian words such as piano (quiet) or forte (loud).

•Mezzo forte
Mezzo means 'medium' and it's often added before a word for a moderate effect, for example mezzo forte means 'medium loud' and mezzo piano 'medium quiet'.

•Pianissimo
It is not uncommon to see a fair number of 'iss' added to a word, which exaggerate its effect. Eg, fortissississimo means very, very loud and pianissimo means very quiet.

E

F

Flat
An accidental that looks like a squashed b, which alters a note by decreasing its pitch by a semitone.

G


This is a G major chord, first inversion

H

I

J

K

Key signature
A collection of sharps or flats expressing the key of the song, found at the beginning of the stave. Symbols are on the line or in the space that the note occupies. If a flat symbol is placed on the centre line on the treble clef, every B note that you play will be a B flat, unless its cancelled out by an accidental.

L

Ledger lines
When notes are higher or lower than the reach of the stave lines, they are placed with ledger lines that extend the stave.

M

Major
Jolly, happy-sounding notes characterise a major scale or key.

Middle C
The middle-most C key on your keyboard, it sits in the middle of the grand stave in notation and it's also generally the divide between the notes played by your right and left hands.

"Articulations tell you to play each note in a particular style, expressed by little symbols near the note"

Minor
Gloomy, sad-sounding notes characterise a minor scale or key.

N

Natural
An accidental on a note that cancels out any previous sharps or flats.

Notes
These are the building blocks of music, showing you which note to play, at what pitch and for how long. Each type of note has a specific duration, for example a semibreve/whole note has the same duration as two minims/half notes or four crotchets/quarter notes.

O

Octave
The name given to the interval between two of the same notes. Look at Middle C, then the next C above it. The distance between those two Cs makes up an octave.

Ornaments
Symbols on notes to decorate the melody. An example is a trill, which tells the musician to flutter between two notes to embellish the tune.

P

Pitch
Put simply, pitch refers to the highness or lowness of a note. It is actually about the note's frequency, which you will learn more about as you piano playing progresses.

Q

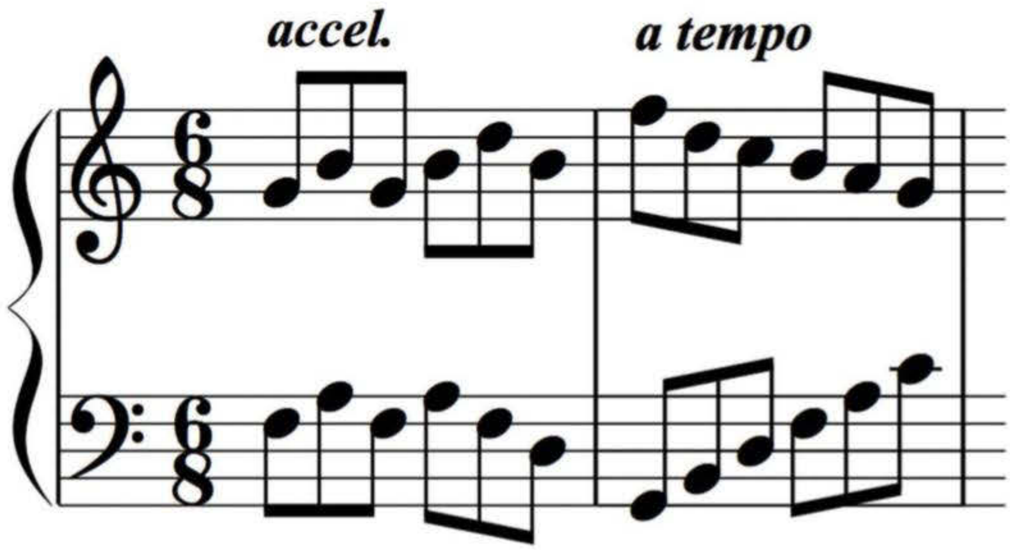
R

Repeats
Instructions in the notation to go back and re-play specific phrases. Repeats include repeat barlines and also the coda symbol (circle with a cross through it) accompanied by the phrase al coda and other terms such as D.C and D.S.

Rests
Indicate a period of time that the musician must not play any notes. The rests come under the same duration classification as notes, for example a minim rest has the same duration as a minim/half note.

S

Scales
A group of notes with different pitches, usually from one octave, that are played in order one by one up or down a keyboard.



> "The tempo dictates how slow or fast a song should be played and can either be in BPM or indicated using an Italian term"

Sharp
An accidental that looks like a hash symbol (#), which alters a note by slightly increasing the pitch.

Stave
The five horizontal lines that notes are drawn on, both on the lines and in the spaces.

T

Tempo
Italian for 'time', the tempo dictates how slow or fast a song should be played. It is shown at the beginning of the notation, and can either be in super-precise Beats Per Minute (BPM) or indicated using one of many Italian terms that are more interpretive. These include:

• Andante
means 'at a walking pace'

• Vivace
this means 'lively'

• Grave
which means 'slowly'

Time signature
The time signature of a piece of music looks like a big fraction at the beginning of the stave, after the clef and key signature. It dictates the rhythm of the tune. The top number tells a musician how many beats there are in one bar of the music. The bottom number indicated the length of the beat. For example, in 4/4 time, there are four crotchets/quarter notes in each bar. In 6/8 time, there are six quavers/eighth notes in each bar.

U

V

X

Y

Z

Type of rest	Note	Length of rest
𝄻	𝅝	4 beats
𝄼	𝅗𝅥	2 beats
𝄽	𝅘𝅥	1 beat
𝄾	𝅘𝅥𝅮	1/2 a beat
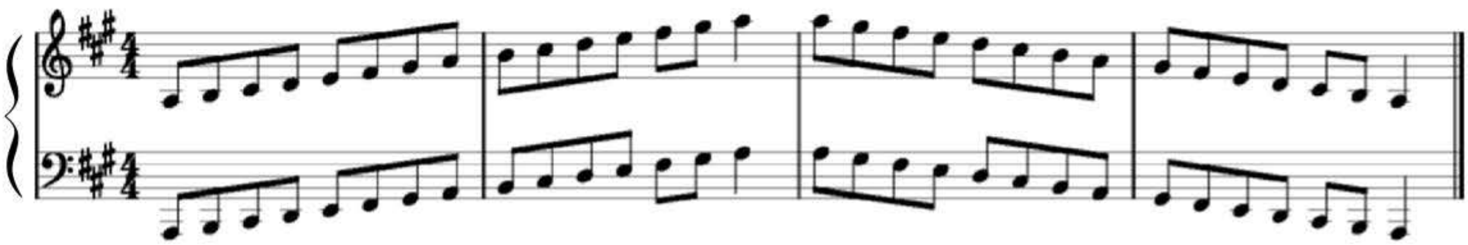
Major scales

Get a happy sound with these scales
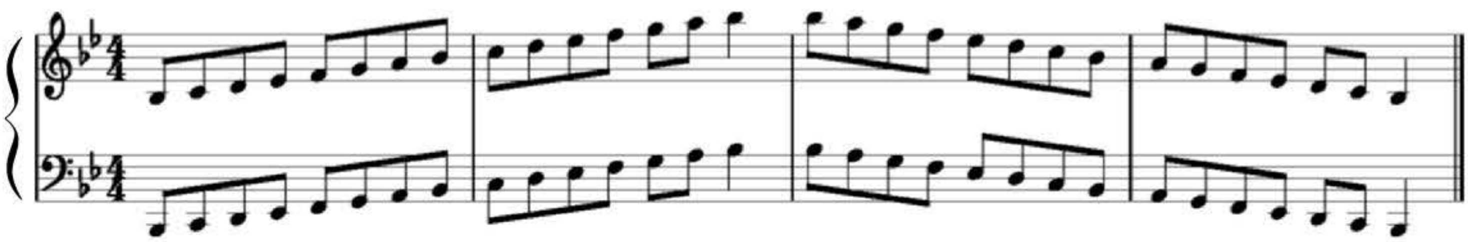
Major scales are the first scales that many people learn to play as they're harmonically pleasing and relatively simple – there are no accidentals to contend with. To play a major scale with looking at music, play the root note then follow these intervals: tone, tone, semitone, tone, tone, tone, semitone (TTSTTTS). The easiest to play is C, as it uses all the white keys in order. Finger patterns are exceptionally important when learning scales, and major scales are a good place to get used to the best way to play. For many of the simplest major scales – ie not too many sharps and flats – you will need to tuck under your thumb on the right hand and cross over your middle finger on the left hand.

> "Harmonically pleasing and simple – there are no accidentals to contend with"
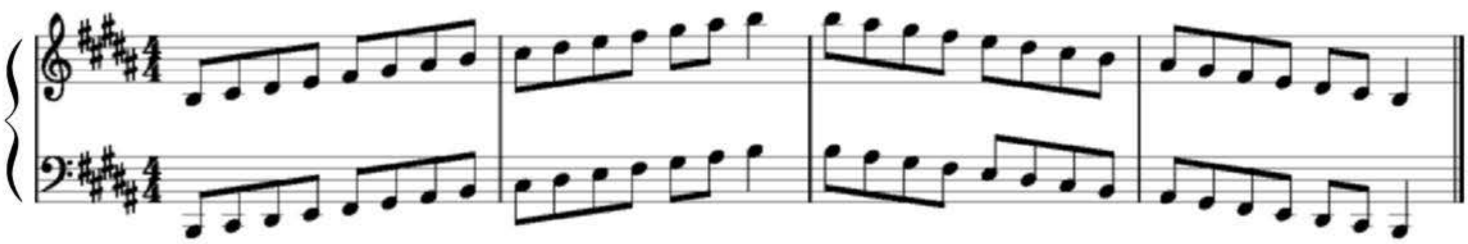
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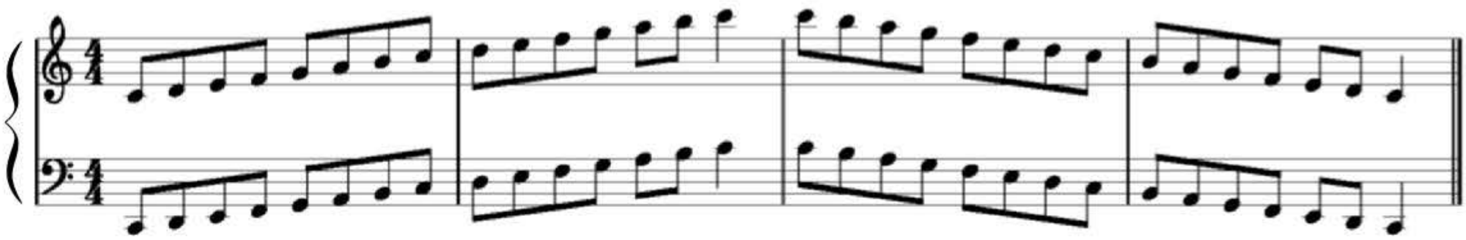


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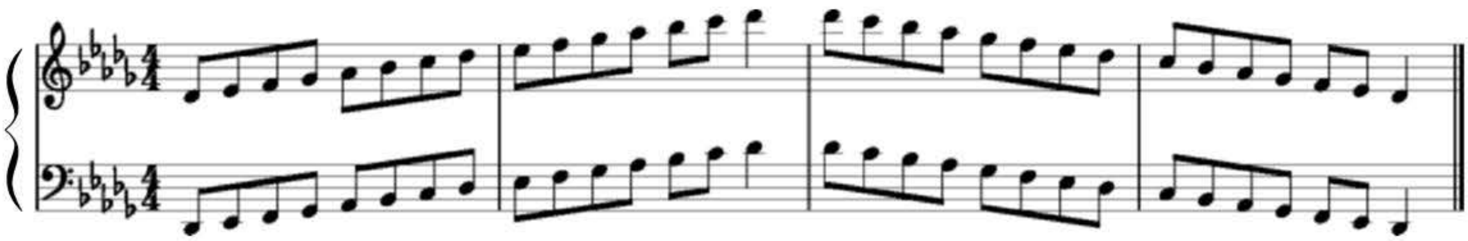


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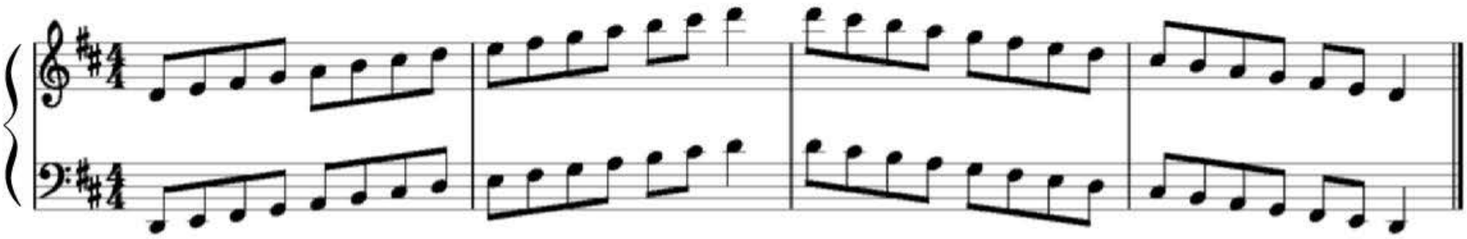


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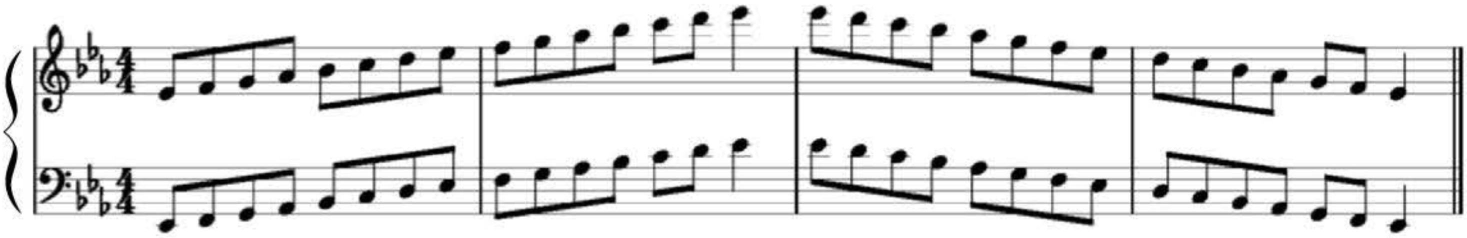


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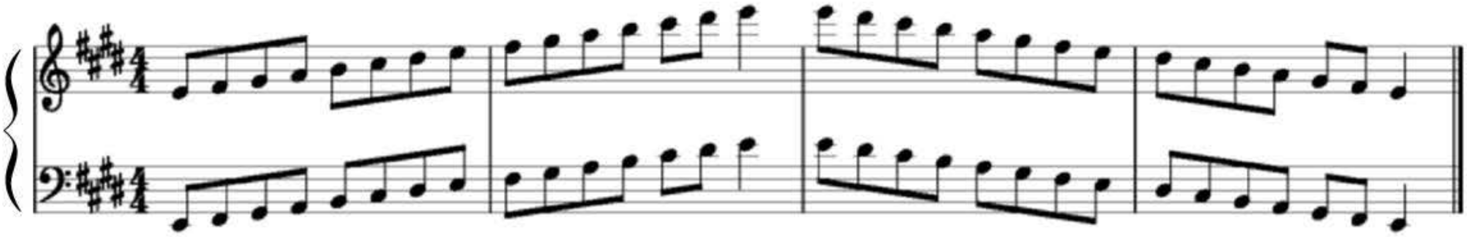


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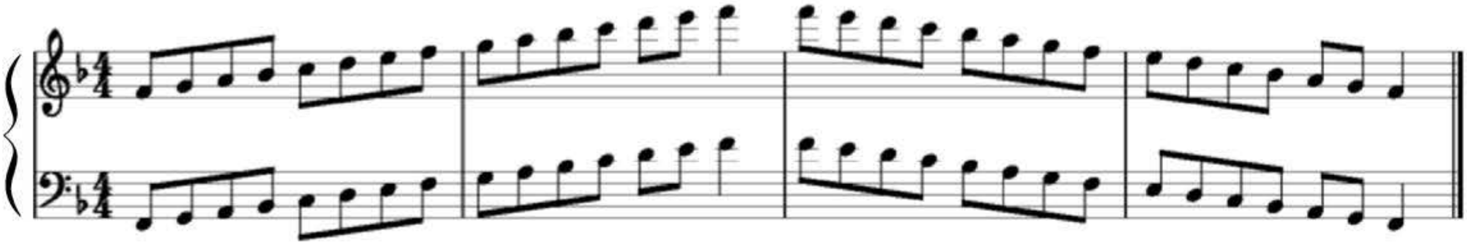


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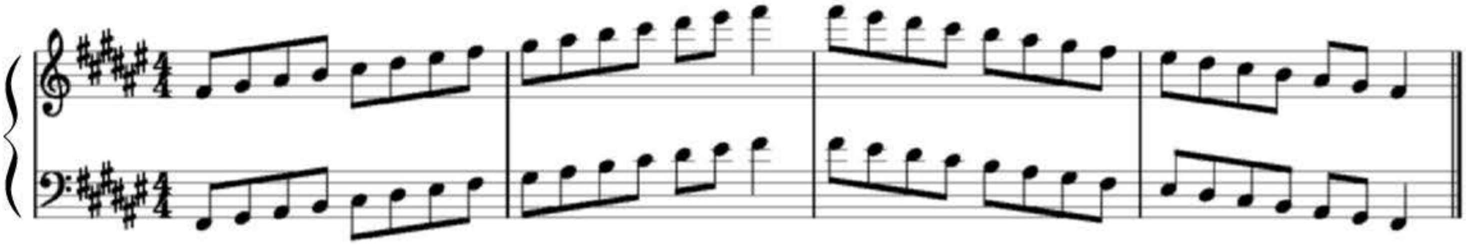


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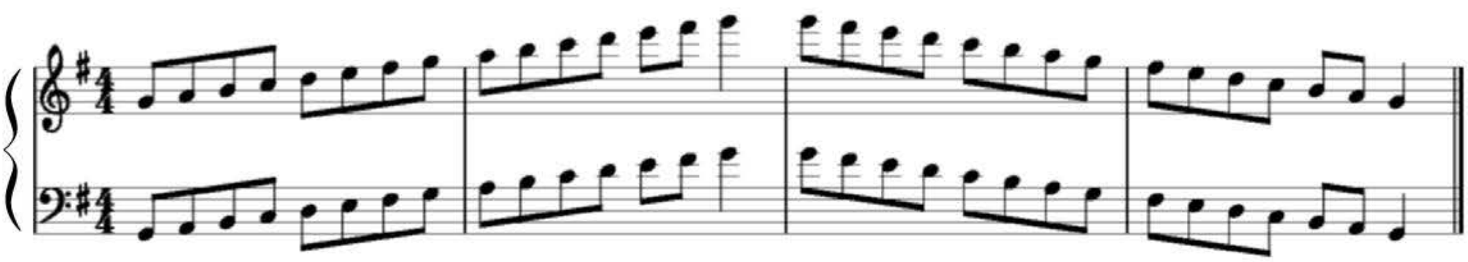


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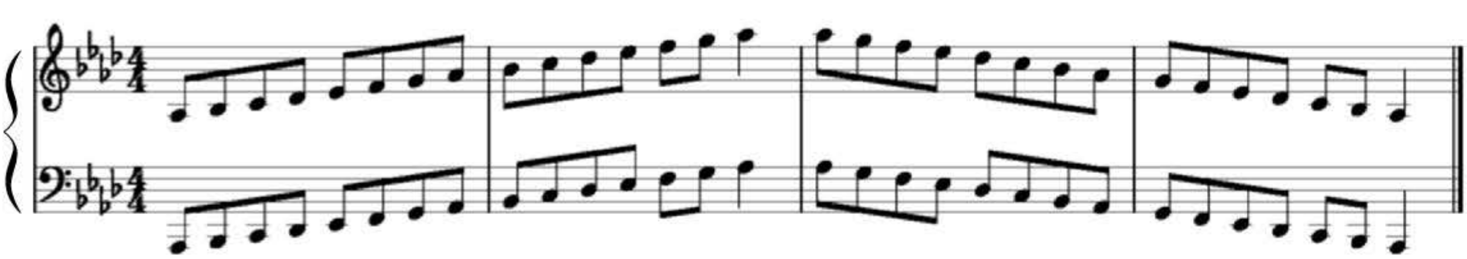


F#



G



Ab
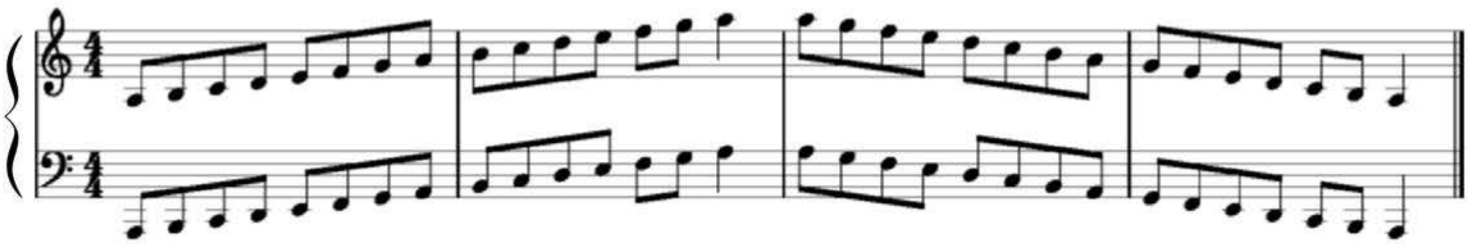


Natural minor scales

The first of three minor scales
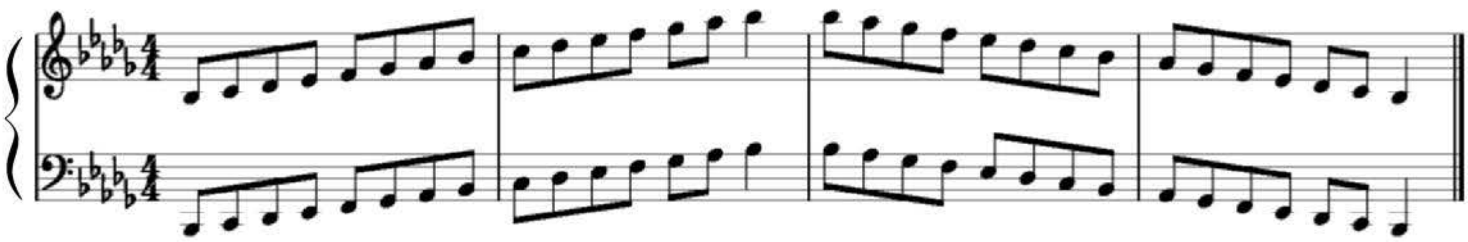
In a way, natural minor scales aren't too far removed from major scales. Take a natural minor scale – we'll use 'A' – then find its relative major by counting three semitones higher – in this case it's C. The relative major's key signature will be same for the minor (so no sharps or flats), but you will start on the root note of the natural minor. So A natural minor would comprise A, B, C, D, E, F, and G – the notes of C major but starting on A. B major is a scale that uses all the black keys and get a bit confusing; however, B minor is pretty simple. This is because its relative major is D, which only has two sharps. So B natural minor comprises B, C#, D, E, F#, G,and A –the same notes as D major, although it starts on B.

> "Take a natural minor scale then find its relative major by counting three semitones higher"
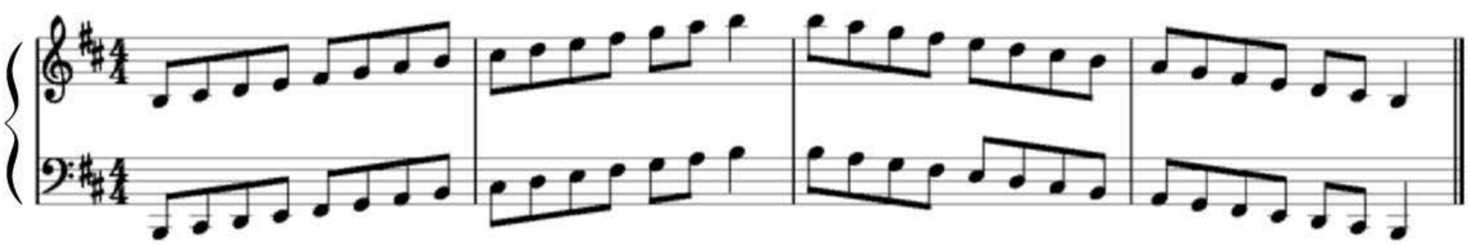
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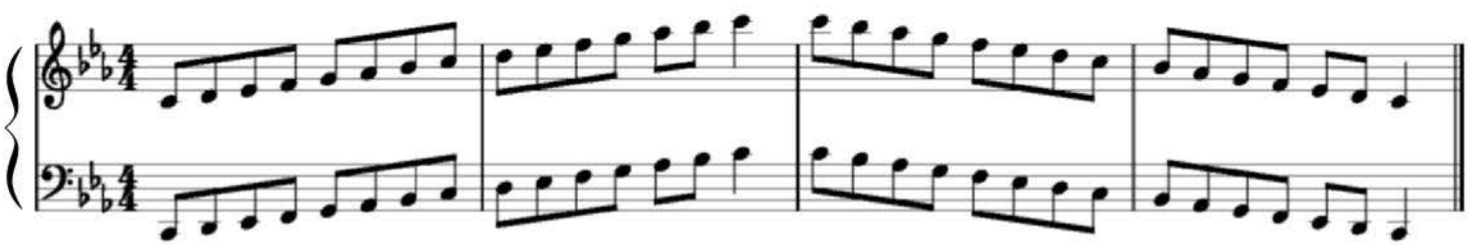


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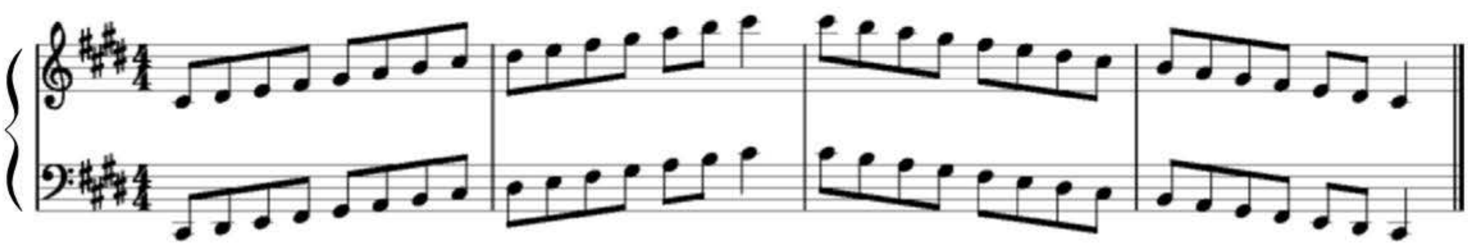


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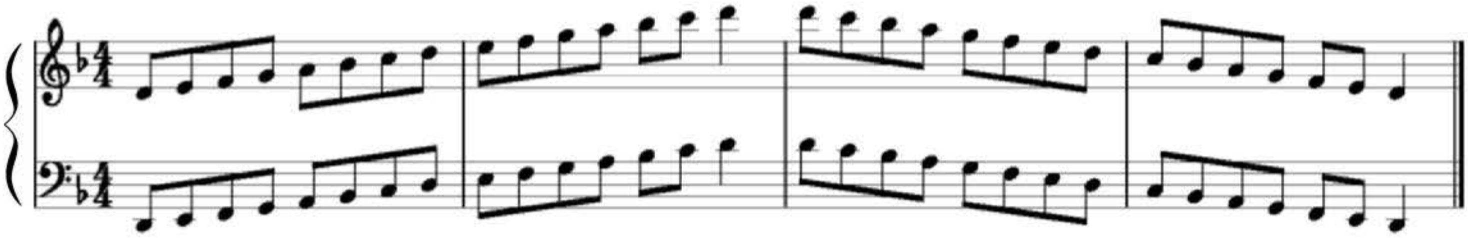


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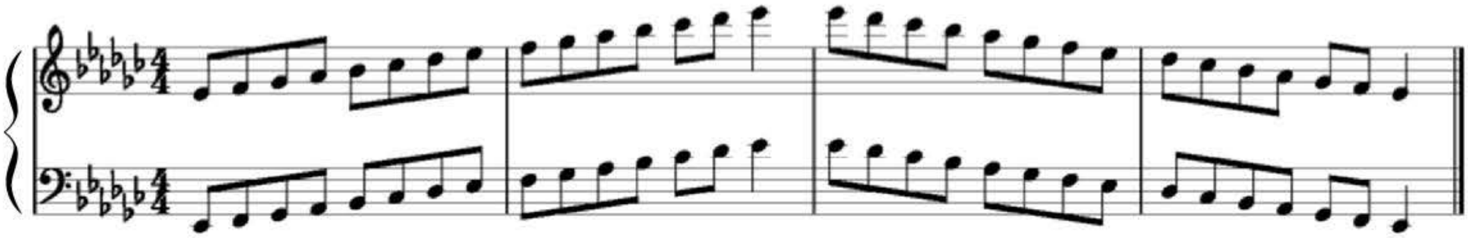


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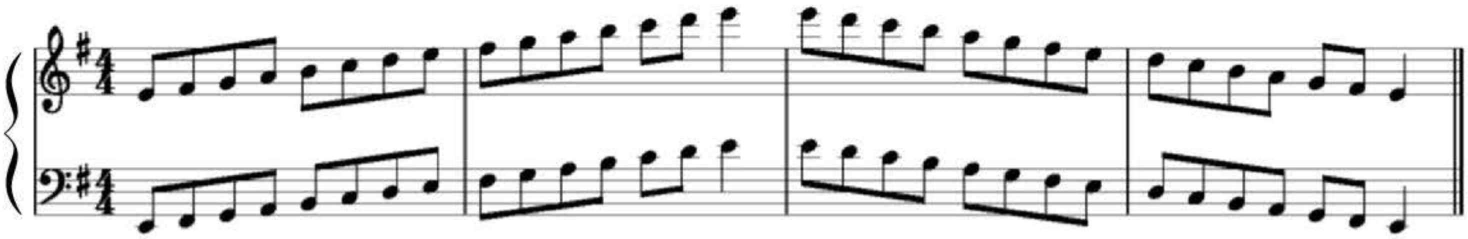


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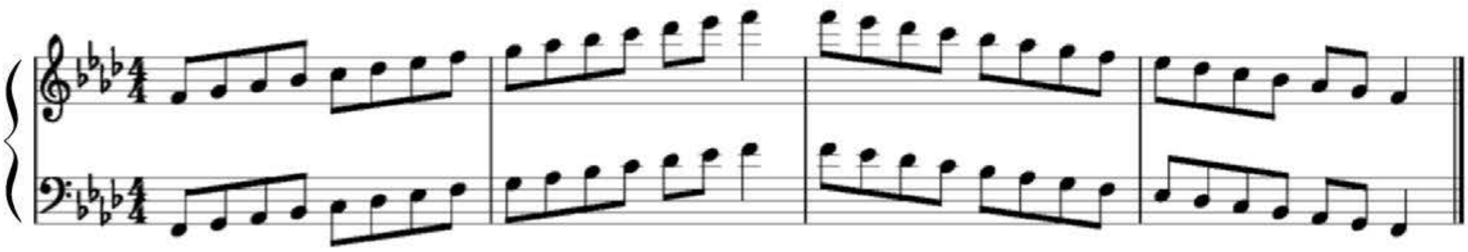


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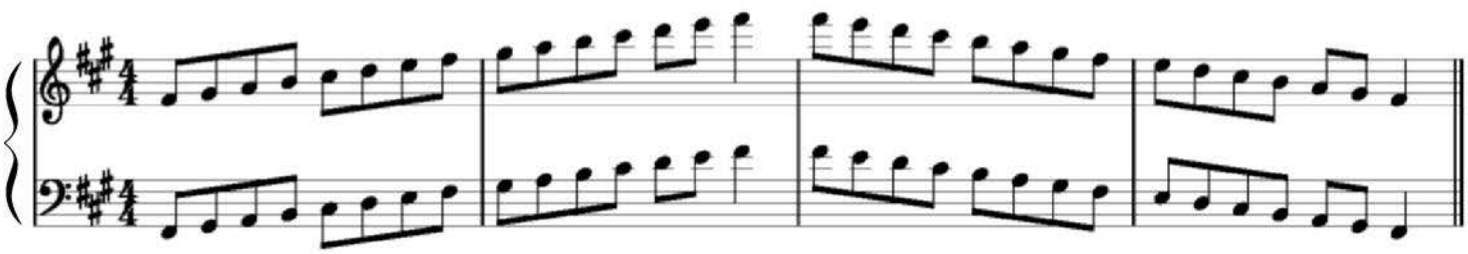


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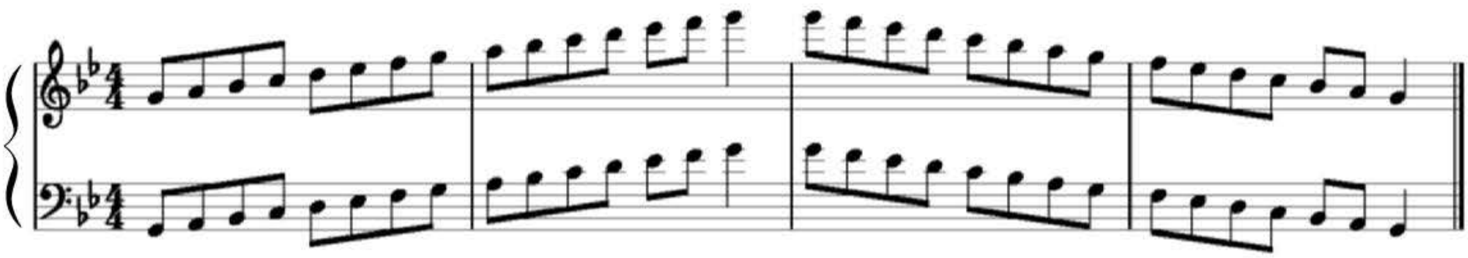


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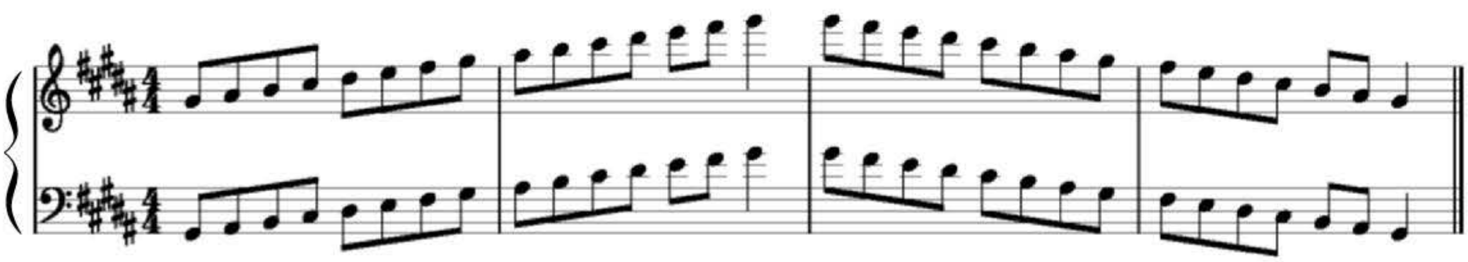


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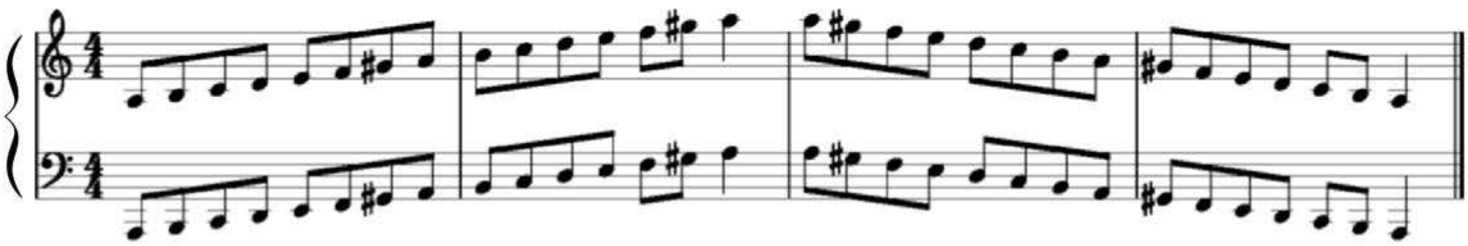


Harmonic minor scales

Try out these spooky-sounding scales
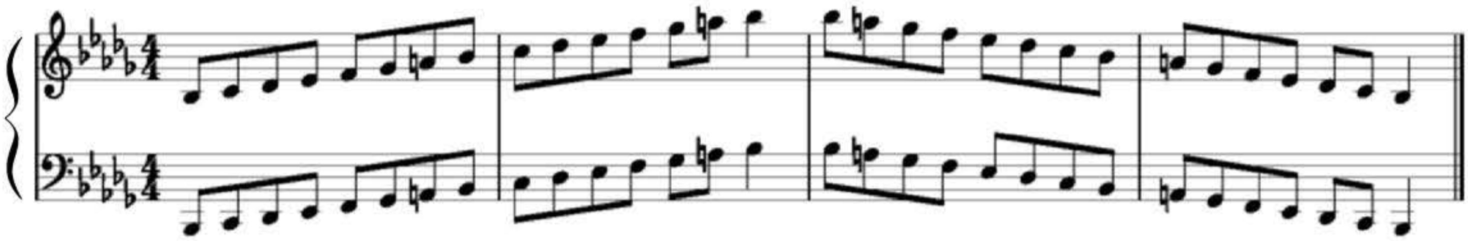
Harmonic minor scales are the same as natural minor scales apart from one rather large difference. The seventh note is raised by a semitone resulting in an unusual interval of three semitones between the sixth and seventh notes. This gives the scale a distinctive, 'spooky' sound that will be easily recognisable once you've played through the scales a few times. Since it's still a minor scale, the key signatures follow the same rules as the natural minor, ie the same as its relative major. So, if we take D harmonic minor as an example (it has one flat in its key signature as its relative major is F), its seventh note, C, is raised by a semitone to C#, resulting in a Bb to C# interval of three semitones.

> "The seventh note is raised, resulting in an unusual interval of three semitones"
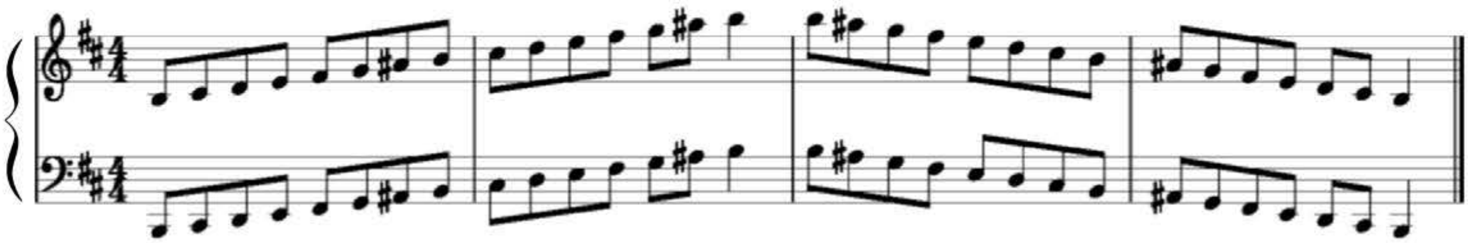
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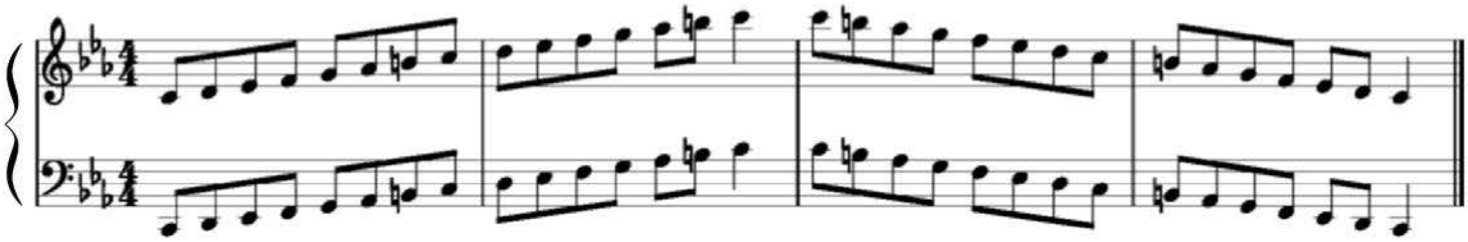


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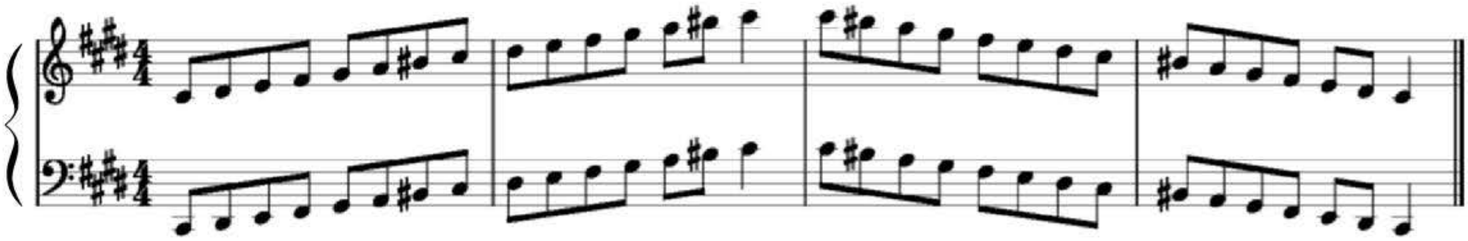


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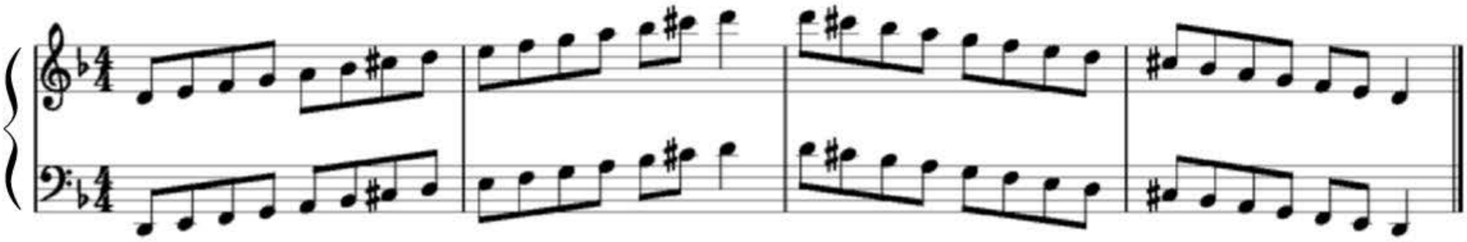


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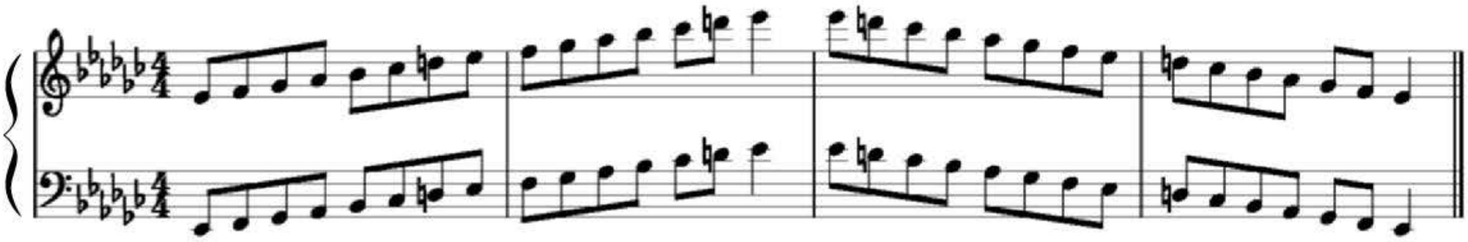


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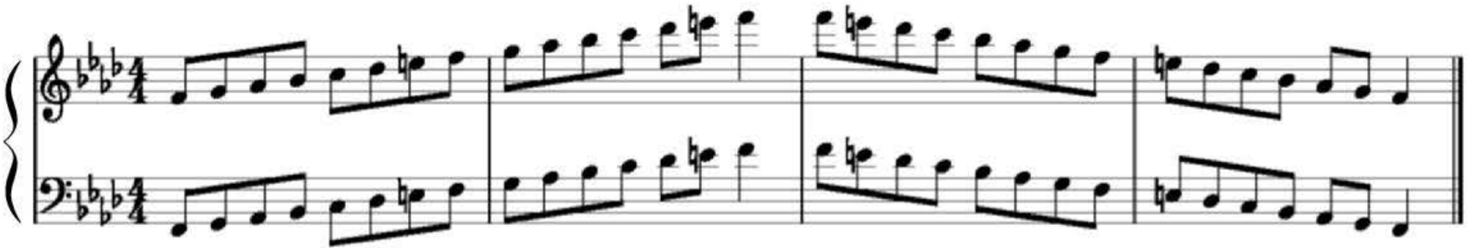


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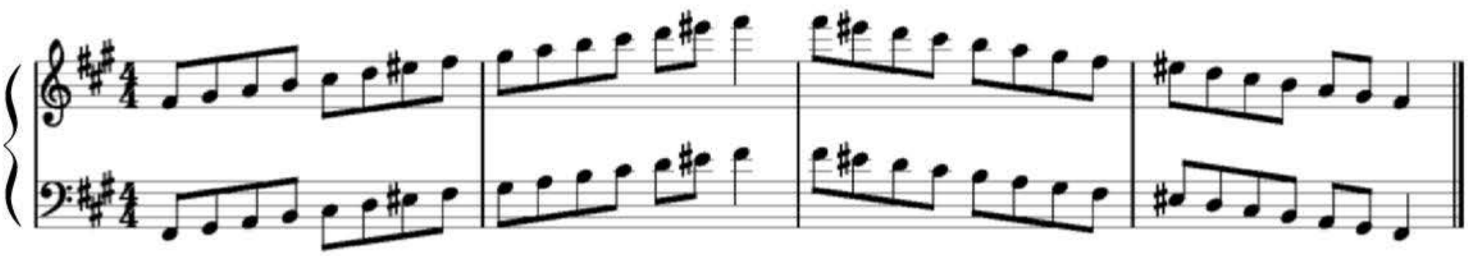


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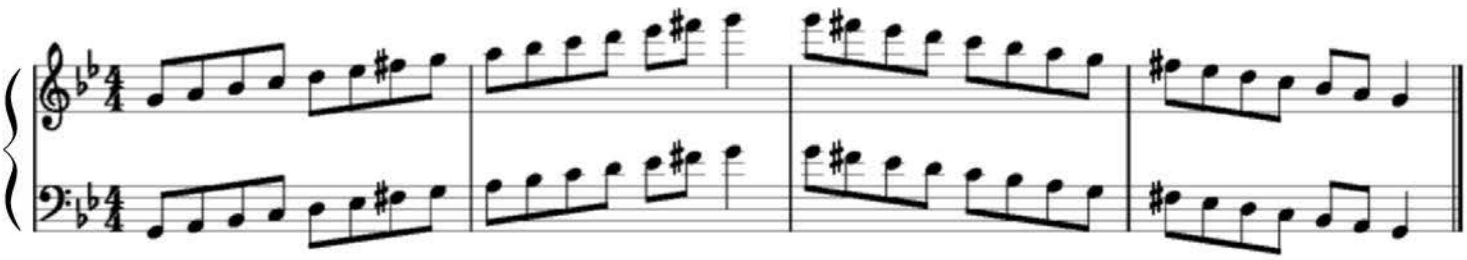


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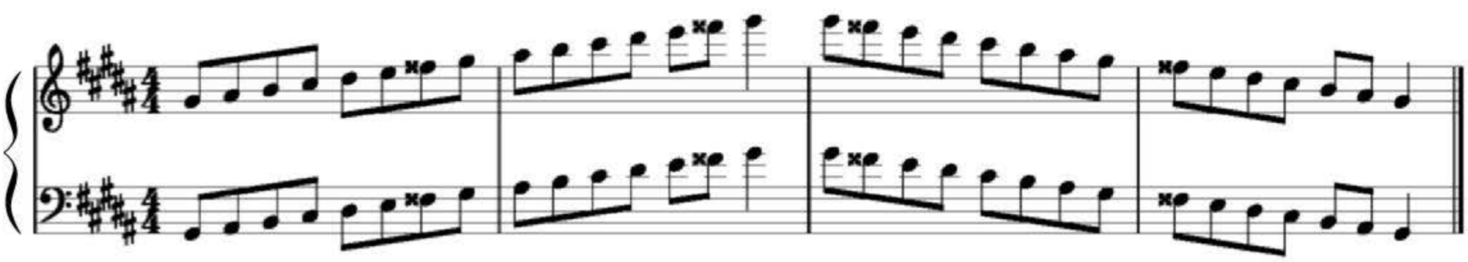


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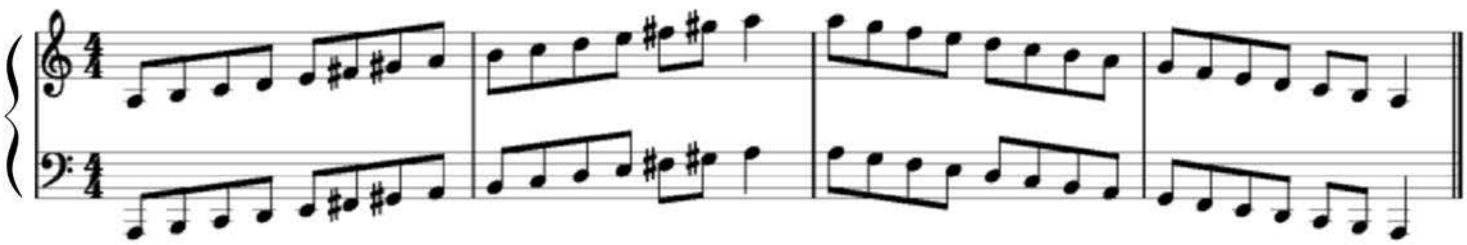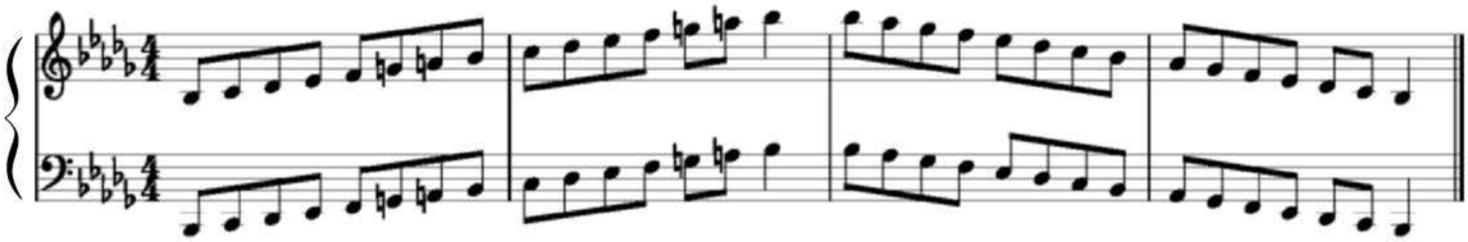


Melodic minor scales
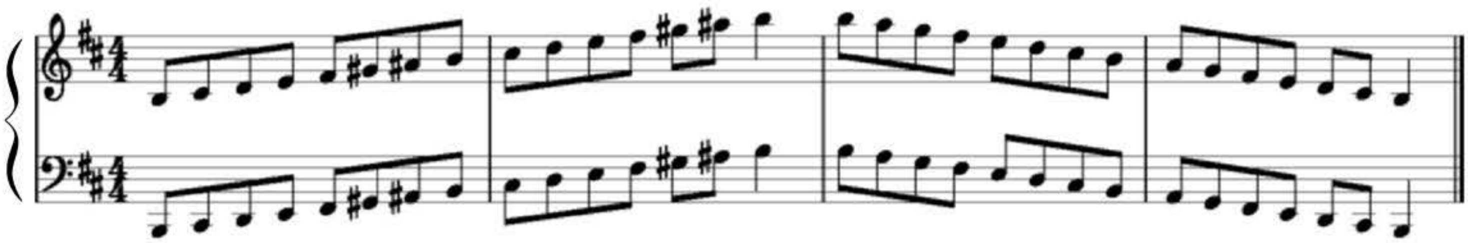
These are almost like two scales in one
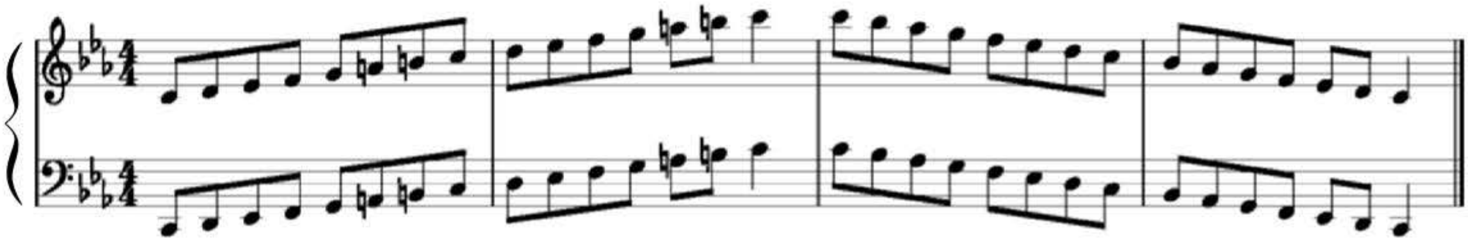
Melodic minor scales are interesting in that their ascending form is different to their descending form. On the way up, they are similar to harmonic minors, except the sixth note is also raised by a semitone along with the seventh. On the way down it is the same as a natural minor scale. Remember accidentals don't need to be added after a bar line, so make sure you check the scale's key signature. C minor has three flats – Bb, Eb, and Ab. The Eb is used throughout the scale but because the sixth and seventh notes are raised by a semitone, the Ab and Bb are both raised to naturals. On the way down they are flats, but the notation need not reflect these notes as accidentals as the key signature rules.
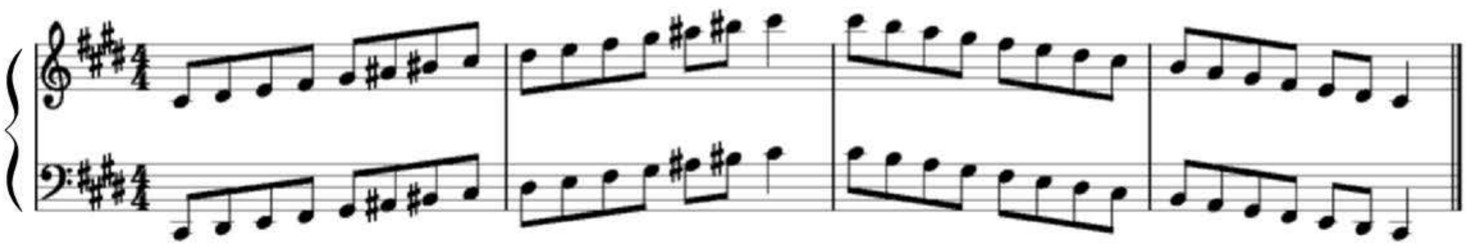
"Remember that accidentals don't need to be added after a bar line"


A
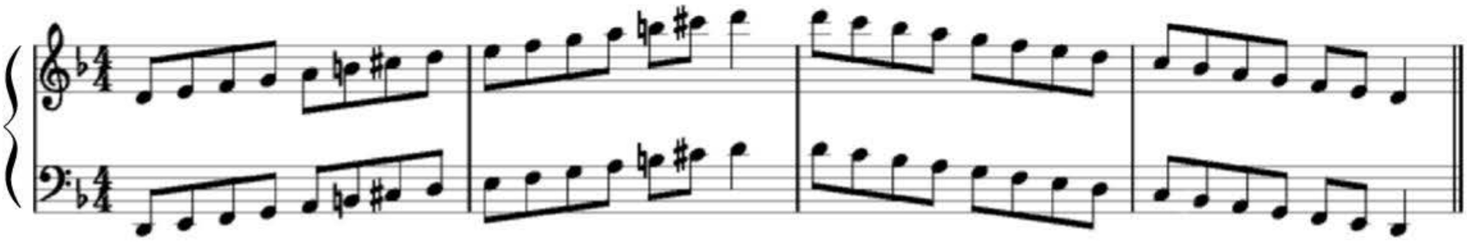

Bb


B
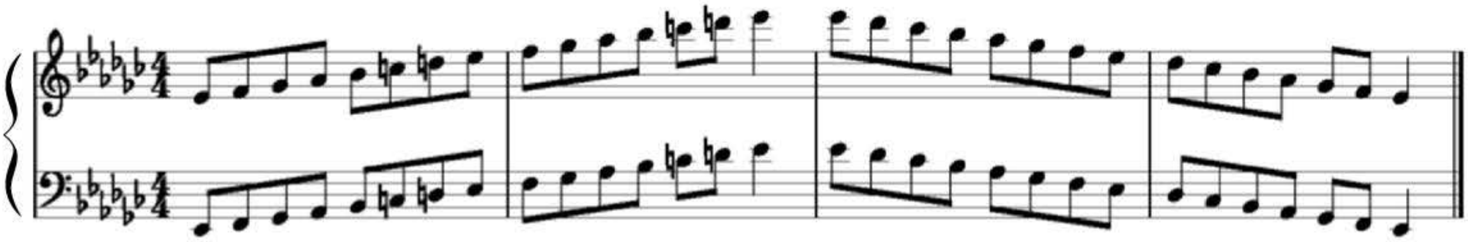

C


Db
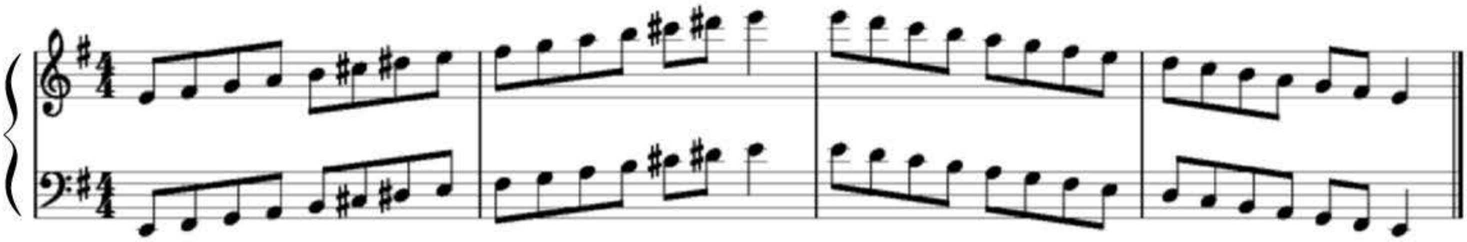
D
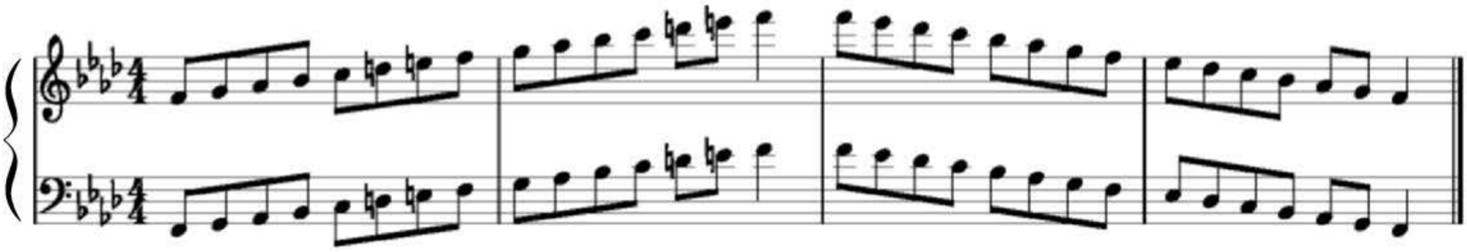


Eb
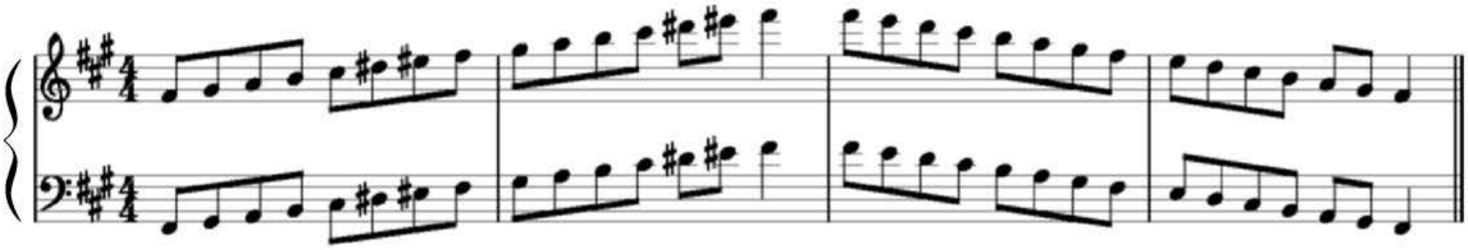


E
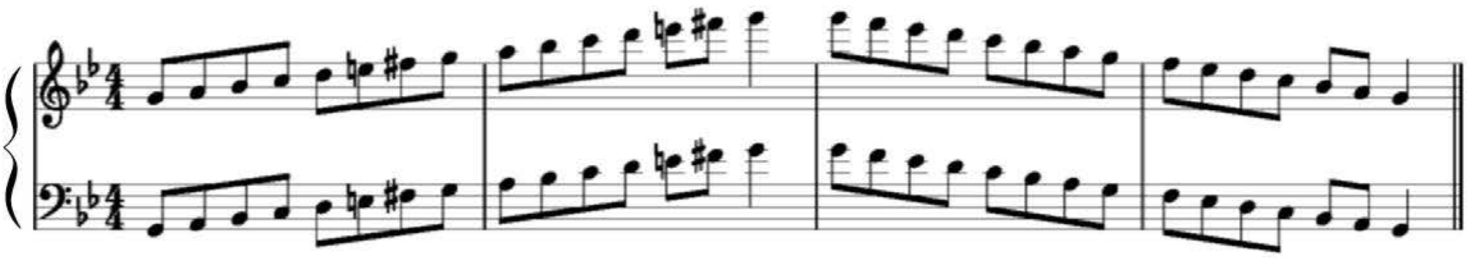


F



F#



G



Ab

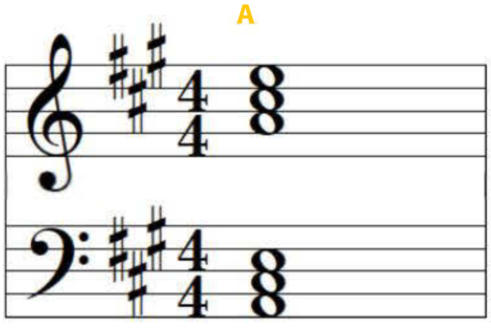


Major chords

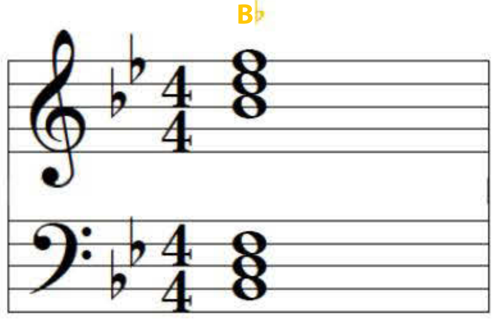
Simple and popular for a reason

Basic major chords are incredibly popular in Western pop music, probably because many of them are easy to play and they give your songs a happy feel. These chords contain the first, third, and fifth notes in the corresponding major scale. It's worth noting that the 'major' isn't often referred to when you see these chords written down – just the letter.

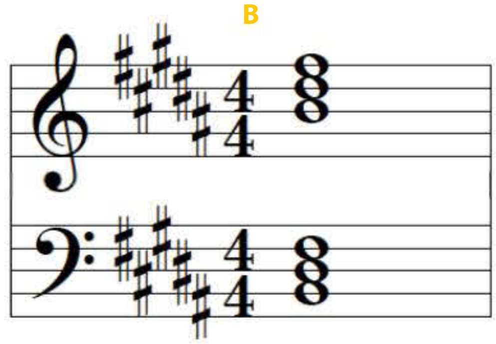
A



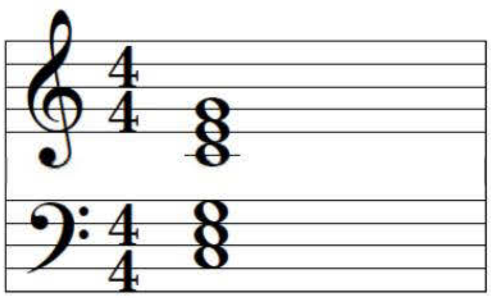
B♭
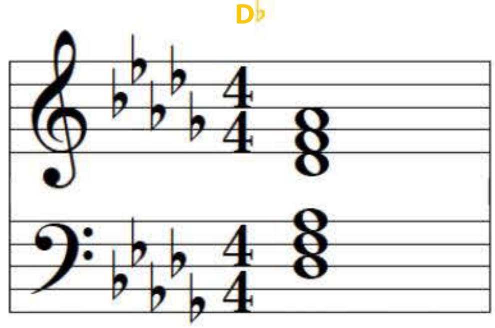


B



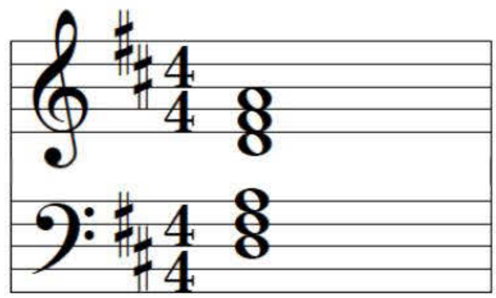
C



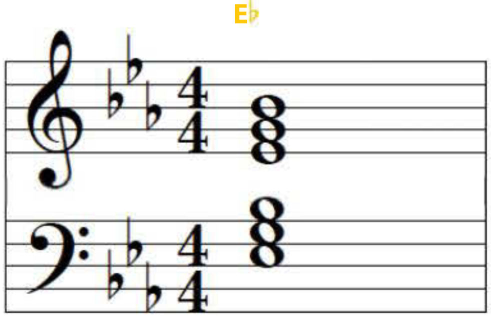
D♭



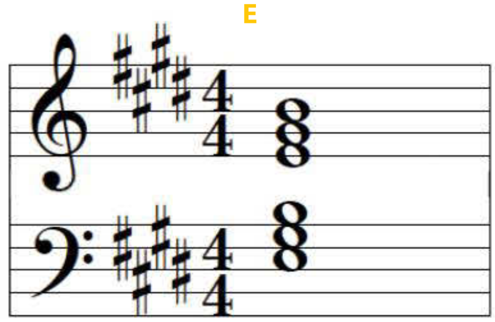
D



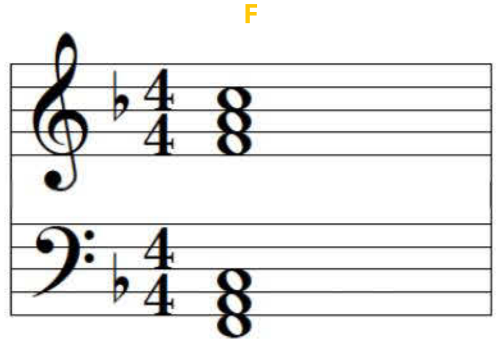
E♭



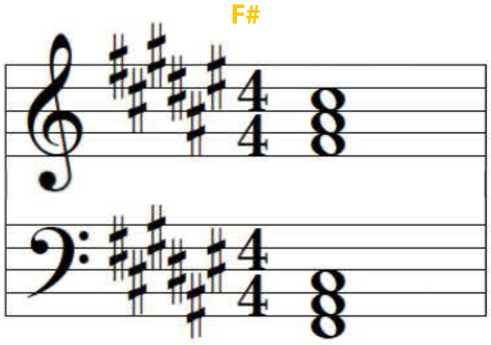
E



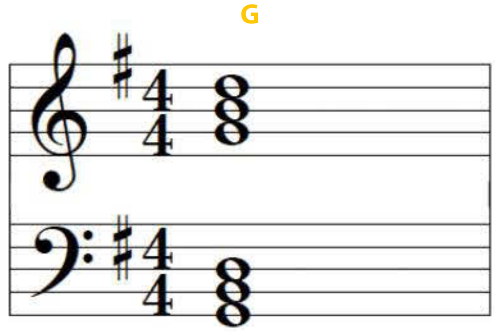
F



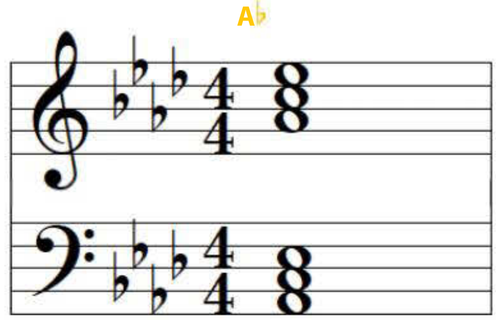
F#



G



A♭

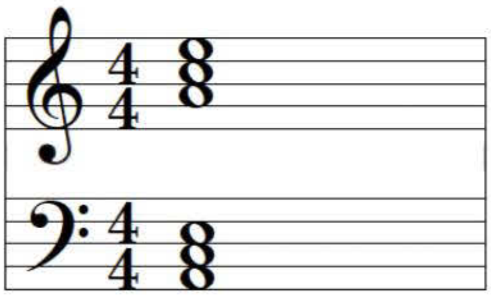


Minor chords

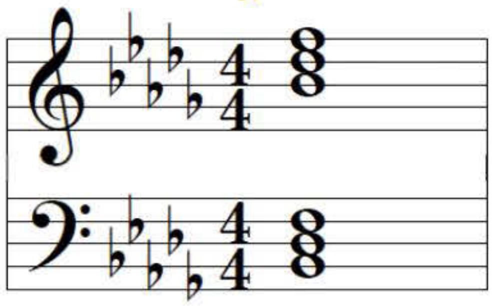
The best way to get a sad sound

A basic minor chord will always give you a much sadder sound than a major chord. This happens because the third note in the major scale is 'flattened' in pitch by one semitone. For example, 'E' is the third note in the C major scale (CDEFGAB), and this is flattened by a semitone to Eb, which ends up giving a C minor chord its distinctive melancholy sound.

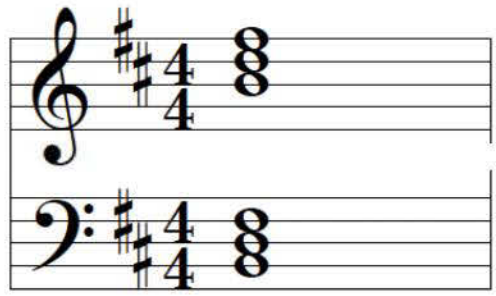
A



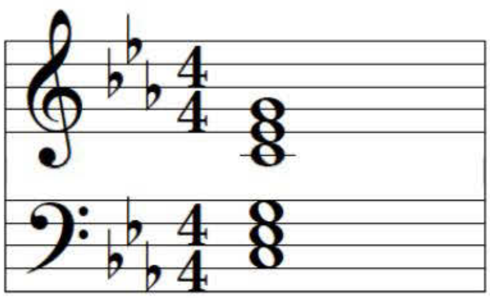
B♭



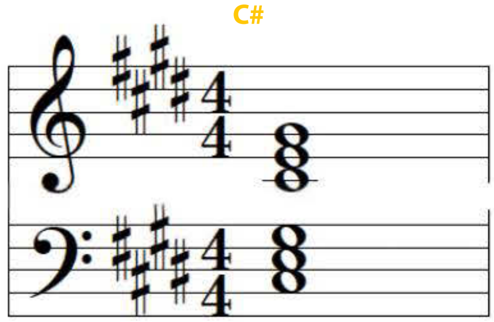
B



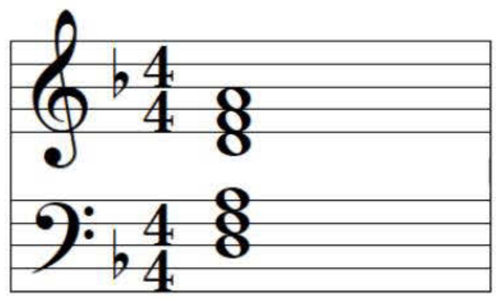
C
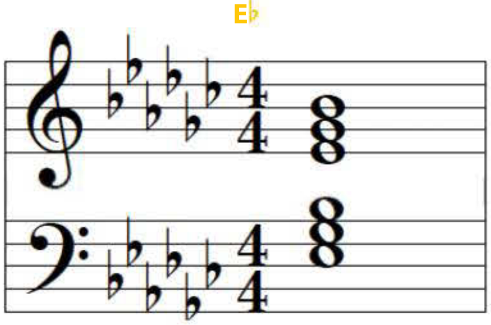


C#



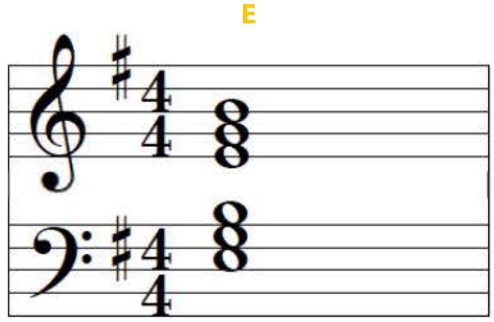
D



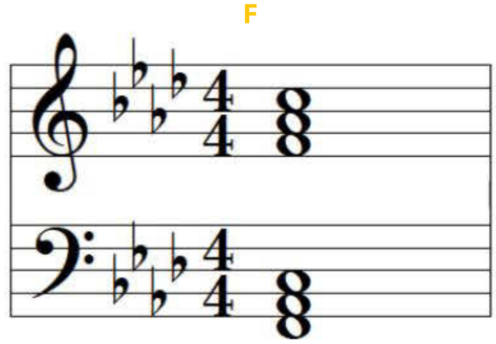
E♭
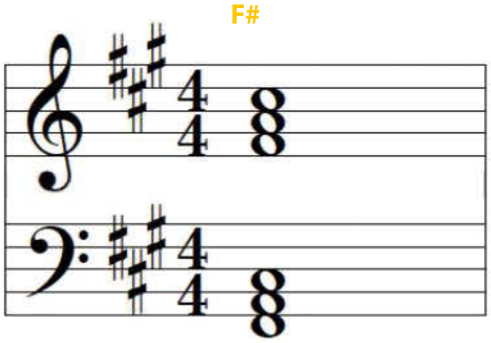


E



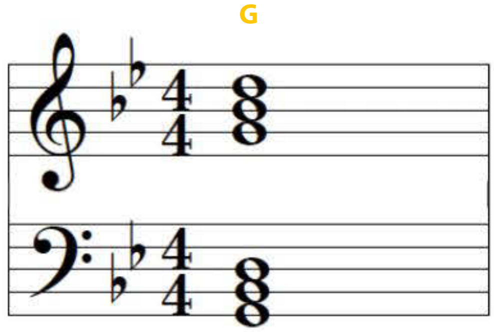
F
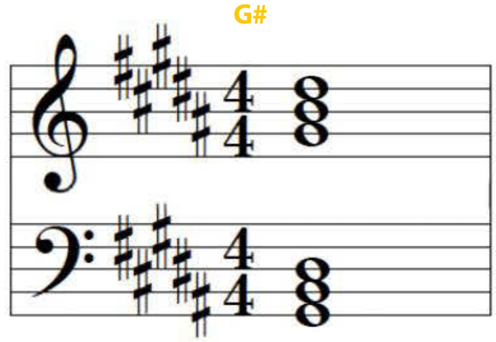


F#



G



G#
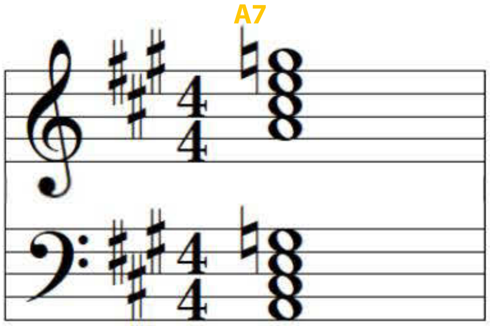


Dominant seventh chords

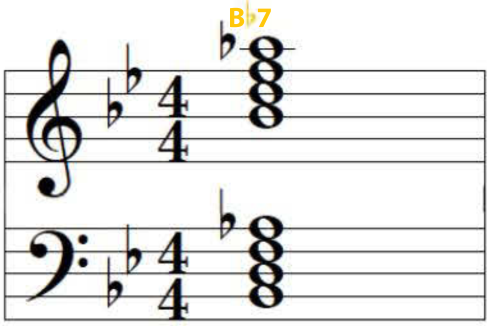
Improve your progressions with seventh chords

The chords that we have seen so far consist of the first, third and fifth notes of a scale, so naturally the next step is the seventh. A dominant seventh chord (shown simply as '7') is formed with the first, third, fifth, and flattened seventh notes of a scale. 'B' is the seventh note in the C major scale (CDEFGAB), so a C7 chord can contain C, E, G, and Bb.
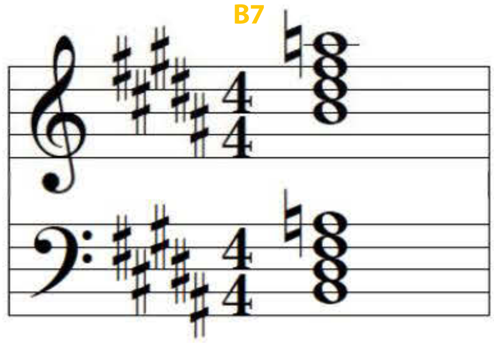
A7



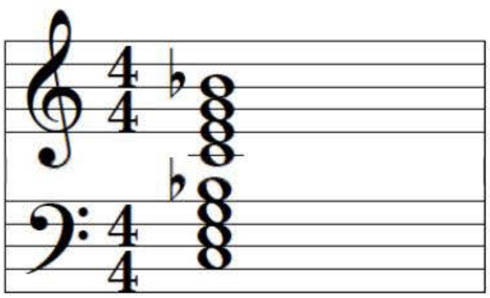
B♭7



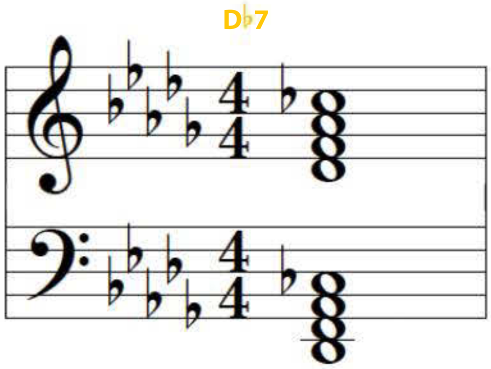
B7



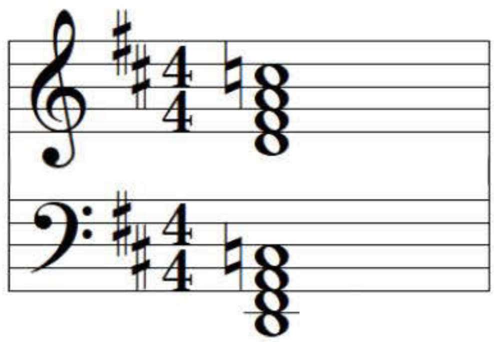
C7
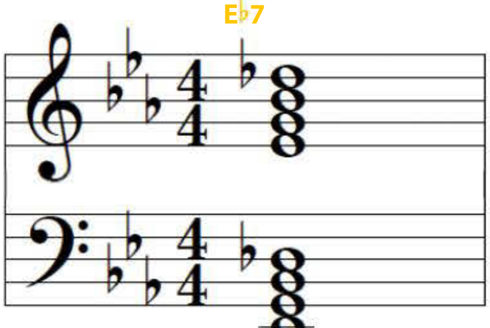


D♭7
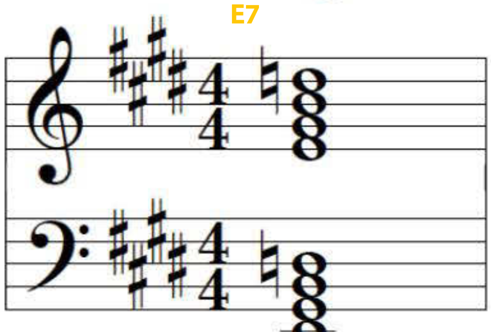


D7



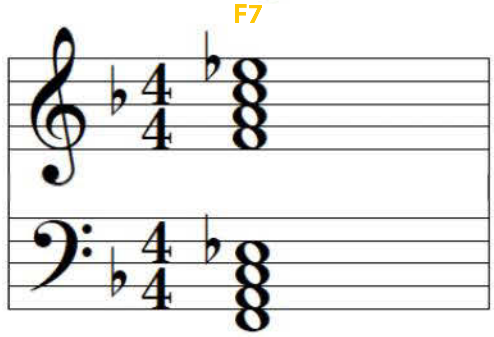
E♭7



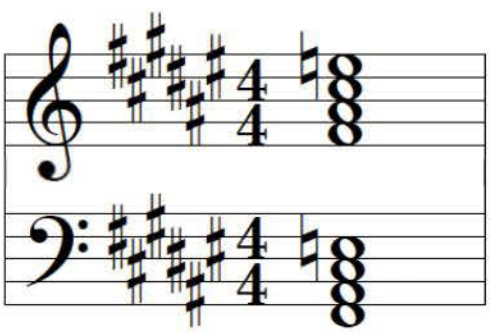
E7



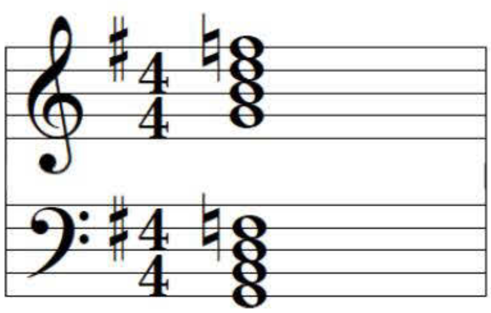
F7
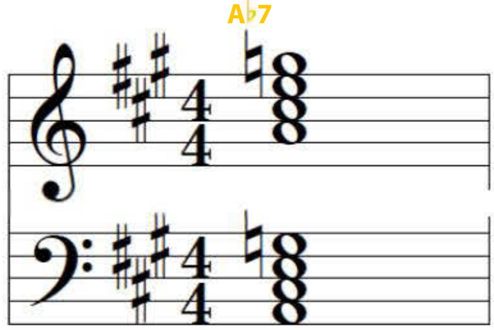


F#7



G7



A♭7

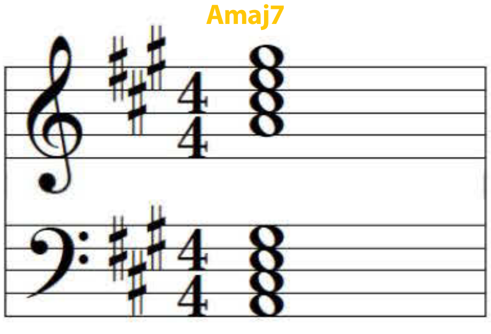


Major seventh chords

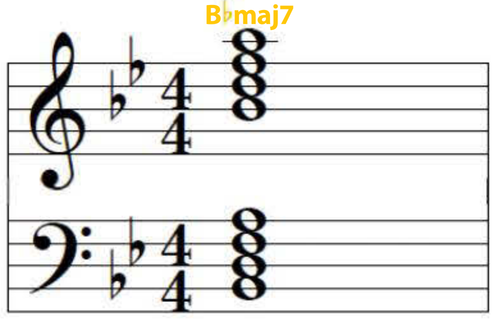
The perfect way to give your pieces a warm sound

Major seventh chords (maj7), are similar to dominant seventh chords, but they include the natural seventh note in the major scale, rather than a flattened one. For example, Cmaj7 would feature C, E, G, and B, rather than the Bb from the dominant, as B is the seventh note in the C major scale. Using a major seventh chord will give your tunes a warm, happy feel.

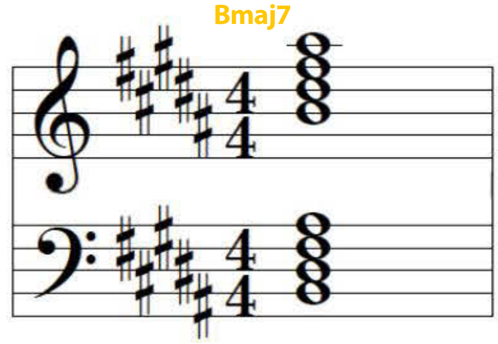
Amaj7



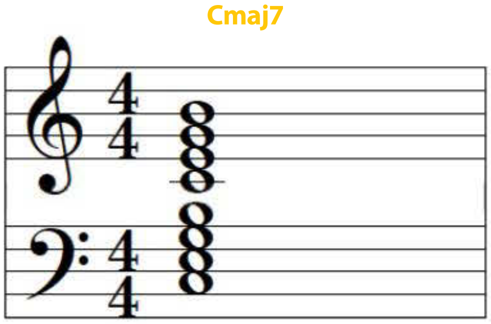
B♭maj7
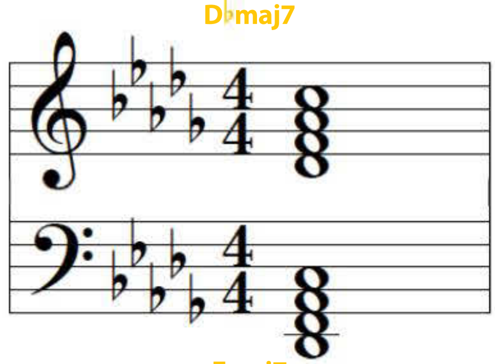


Bmaj7
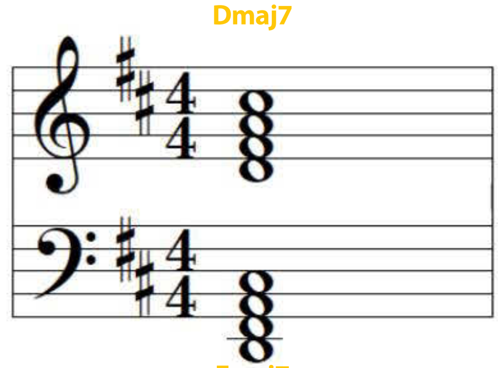


Cmaj7



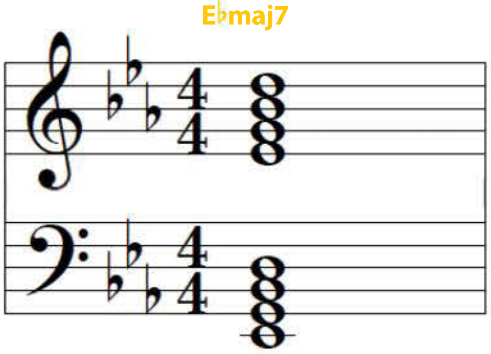
D♭maj7



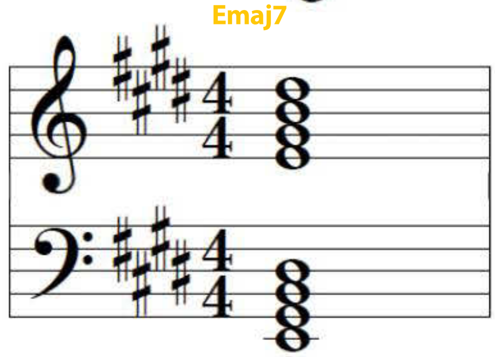
Dmaj7



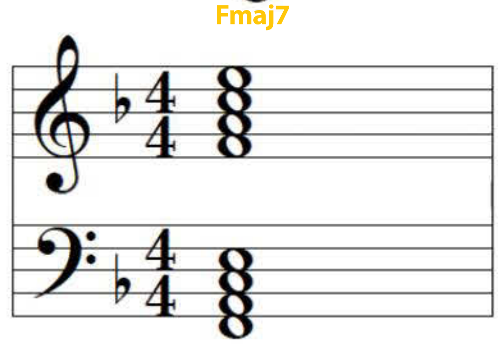
E♭maj7



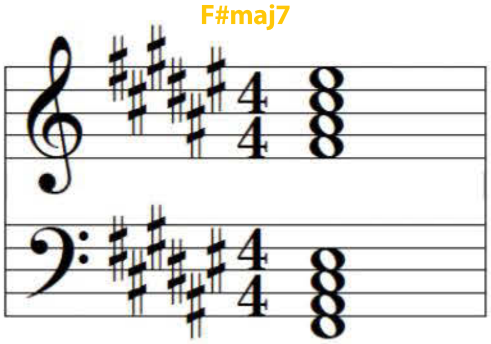
Emaj7



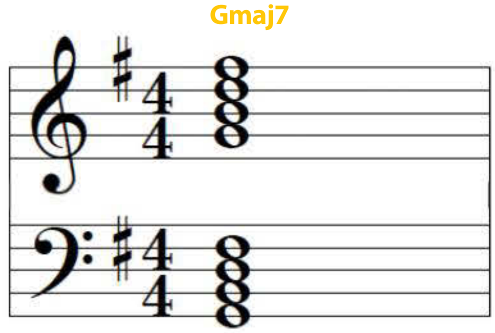
Fmaj7



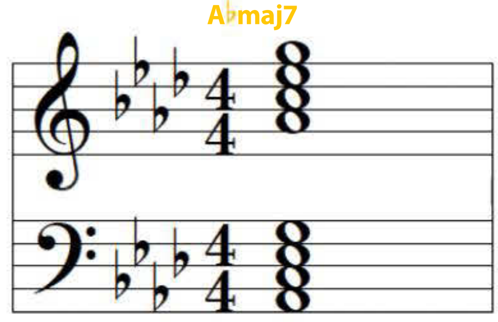
F#maj7



Gmaj7



A♭maj7

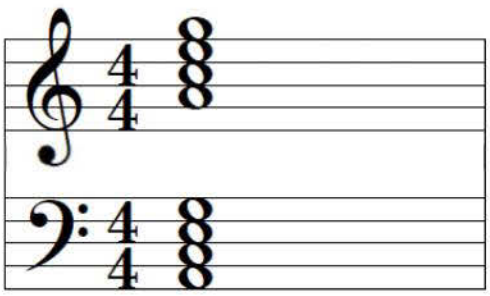


Minor seventh chords
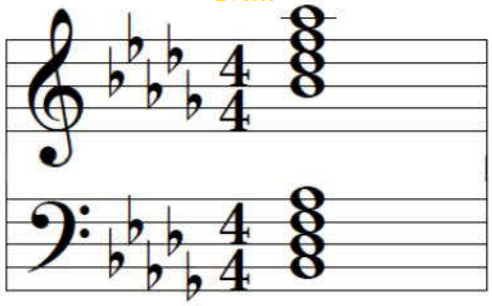
Jazz your songs up with some m7 chords

Minor seventh chords (m7) use the flattened seventh note that we have seen in dominant seventh chords in addition to a flattened third note found in basic minor chords. So Cm7 would contain C, Eb, G, and Bb. E and B are the third and seventh notes respectively of the C major scale, and they are both flattened here in order to create the m7 chord.

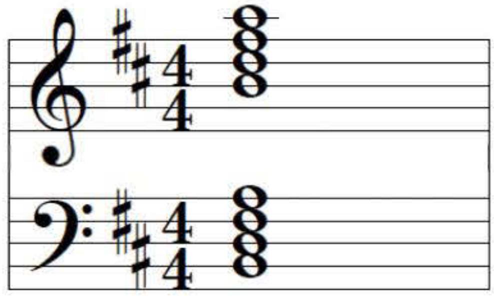
Am7



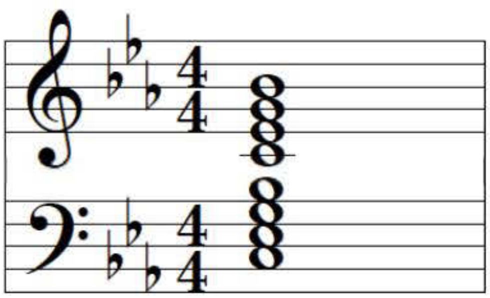
B♭m7



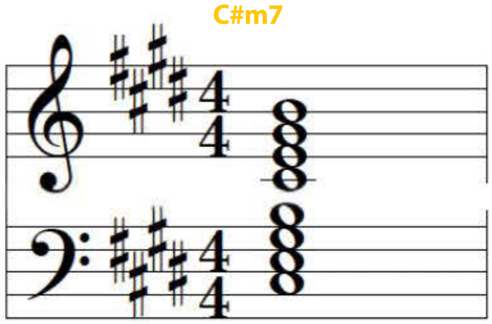
Bm7



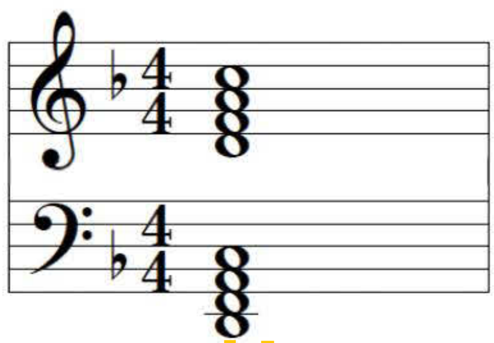
Cm7
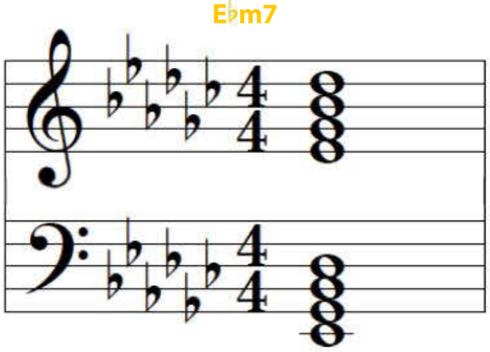


C#m7



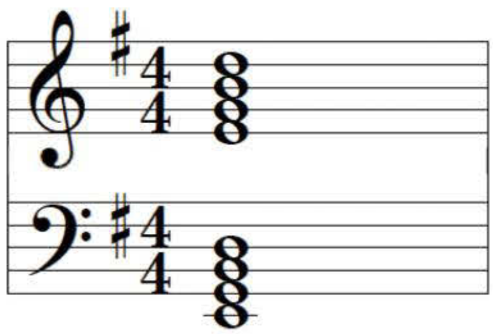
Dm7



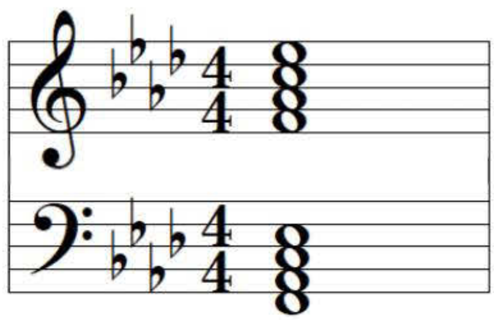
E♭m7



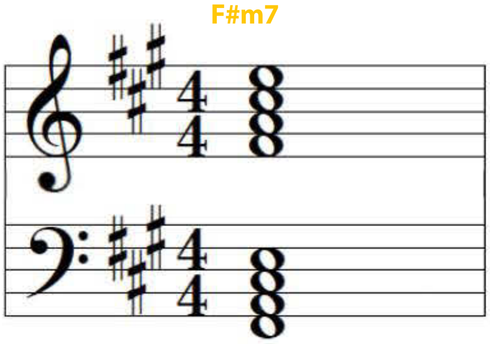
Em7
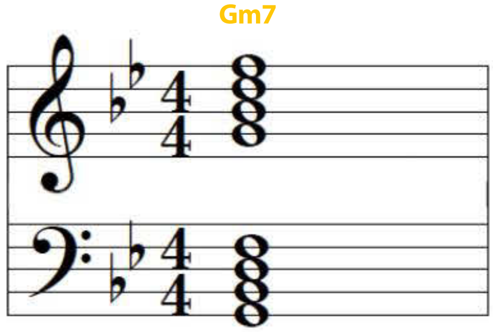


Fm7
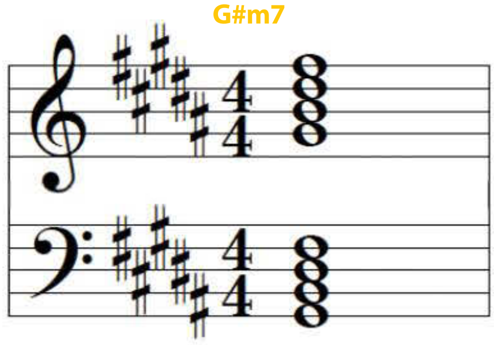


F#m7



Gm7



G#m7

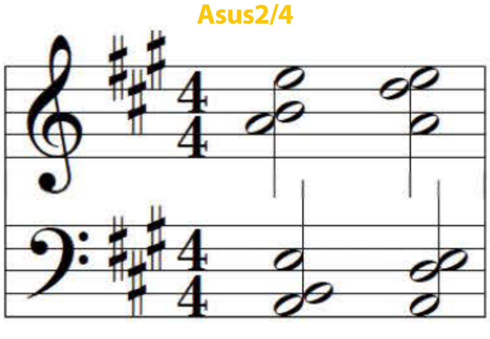


Suspended chords
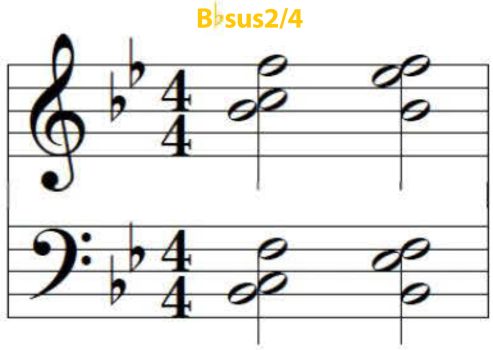
Add subtle variations with suspended patterns

So far, all of the chords that we've looked at have featured the third note of their corresponding major or minor scale. Suspended chords (sus) don't, replacing it instead with either a second (sus2) or a fourth (sus4). So Csus4 would feature an F (the fourth note in the C major scale) instead of the E found in a major chord. Here is a list of sus4 chords.
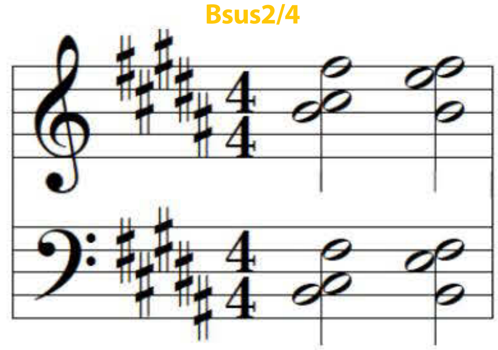
Asus2/4



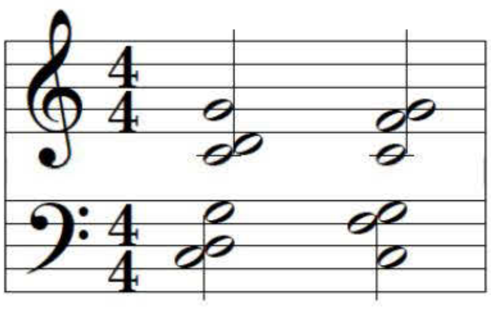
B♭sus2/4
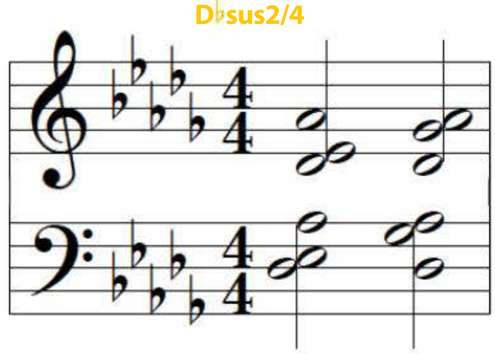


Bsus2/4
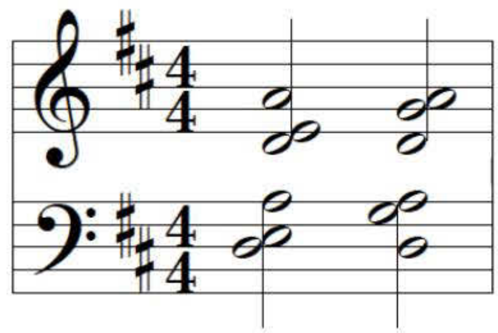


Csus2/4
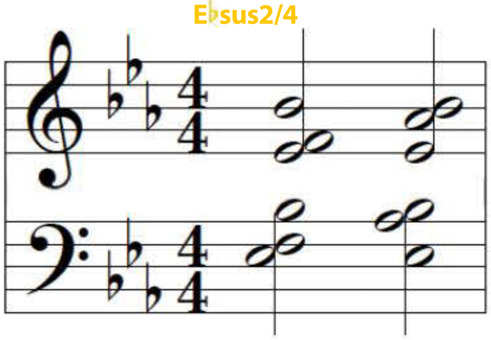


D♭sus2/4
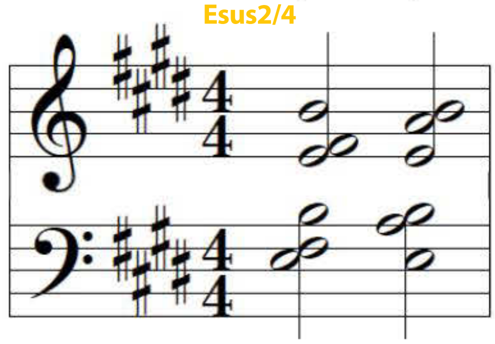


Dsus2/4
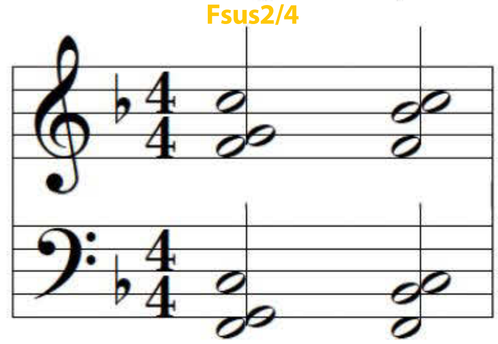


E♭sus2/4
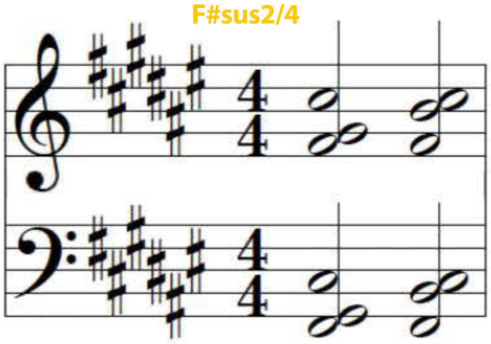


Esus2/4
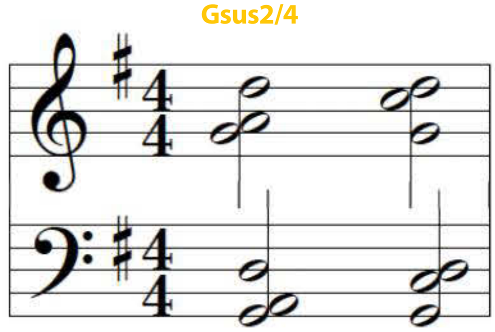


Fsus2/4
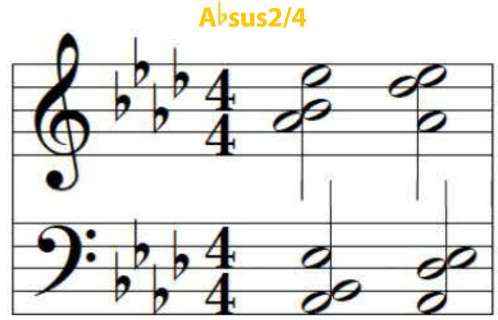


F#sus2/4



Gsus2/4



A♭sus2/4



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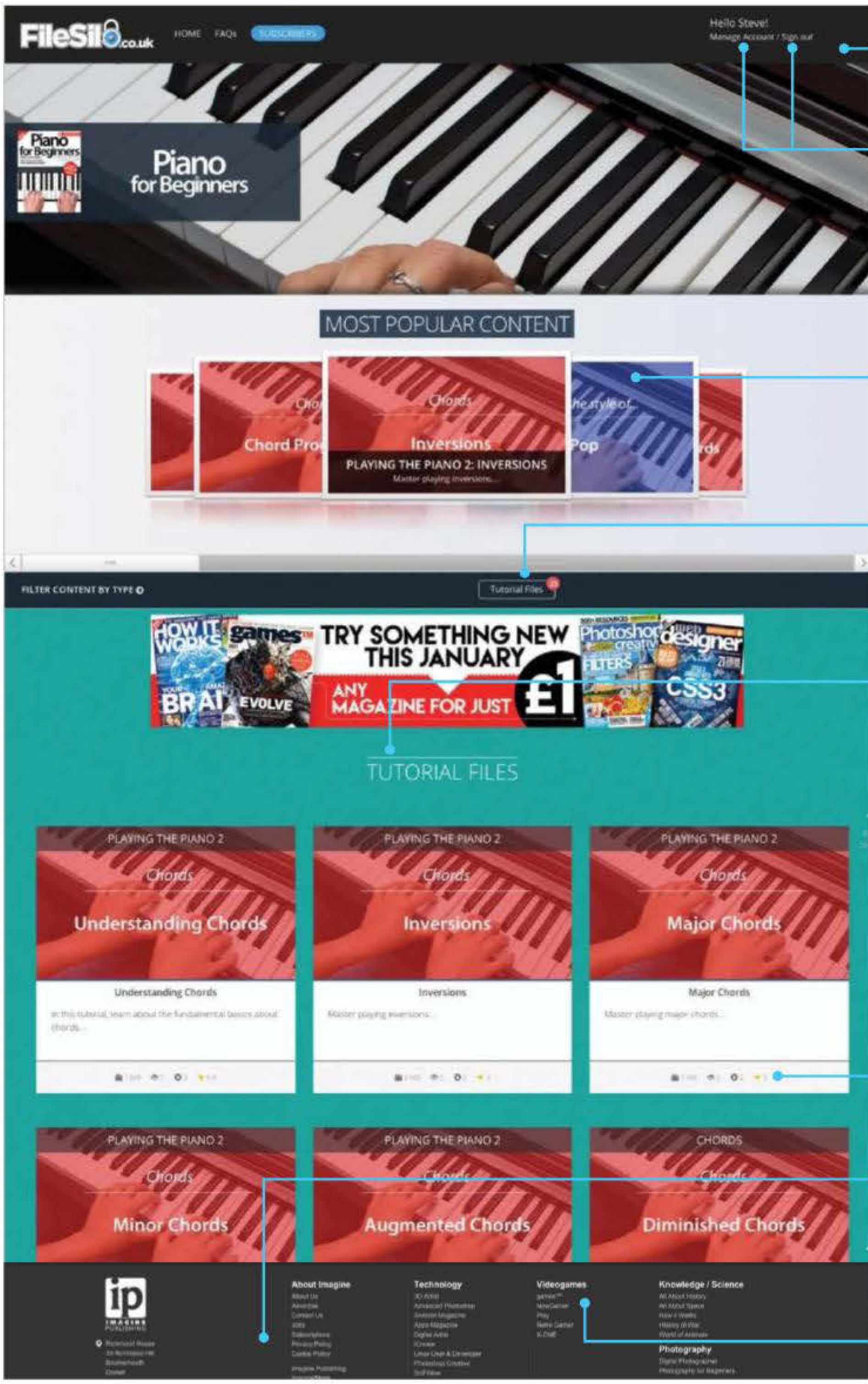
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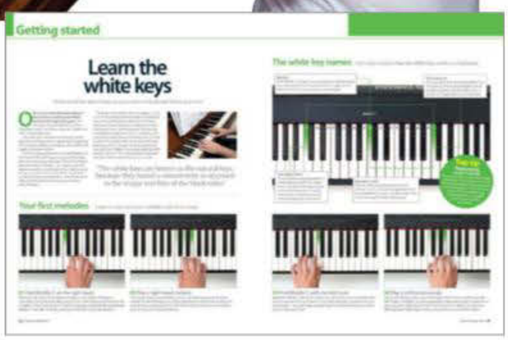


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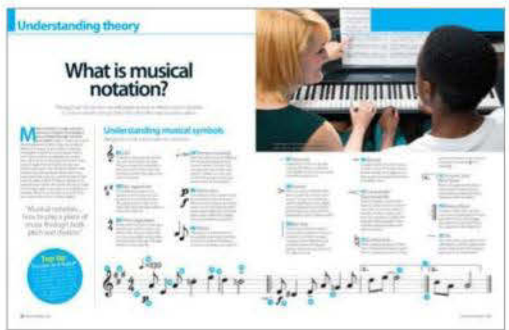


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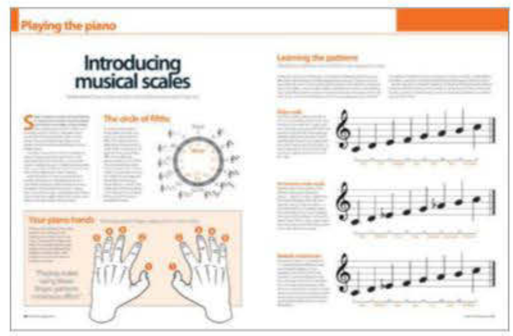
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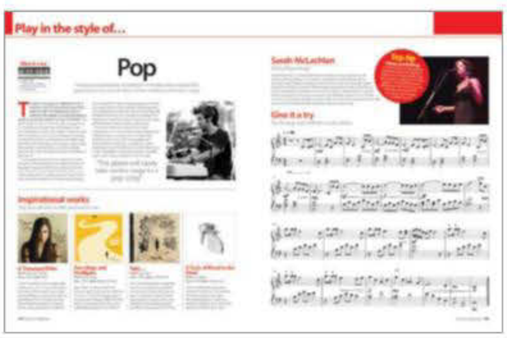


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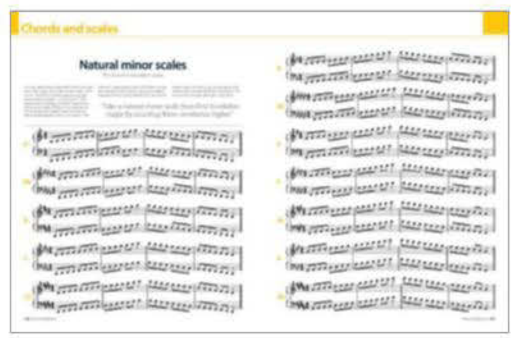
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